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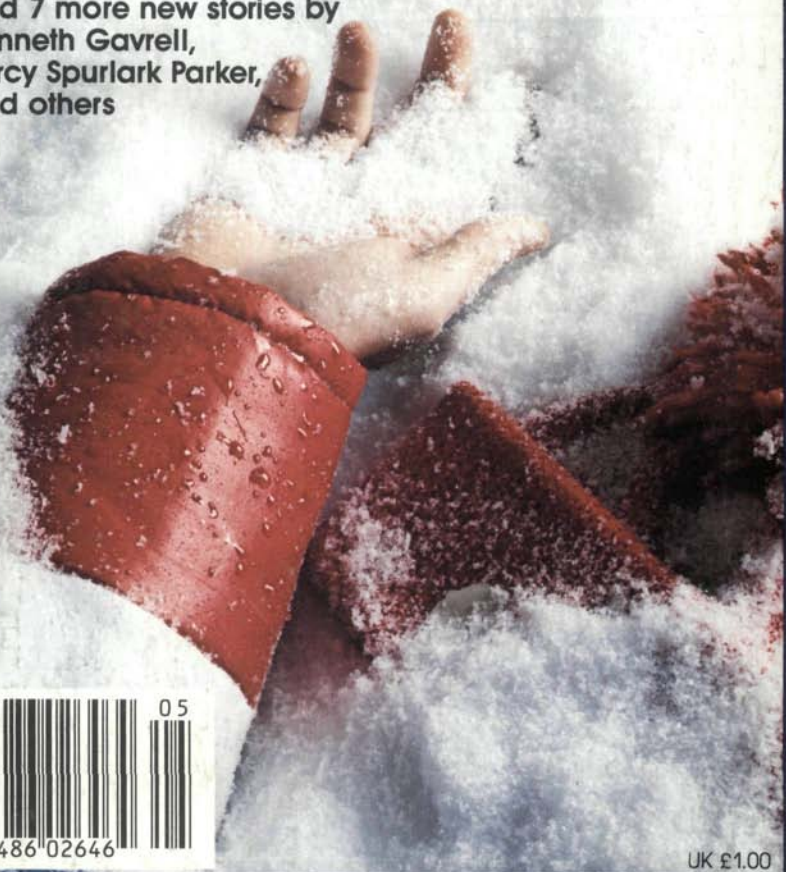
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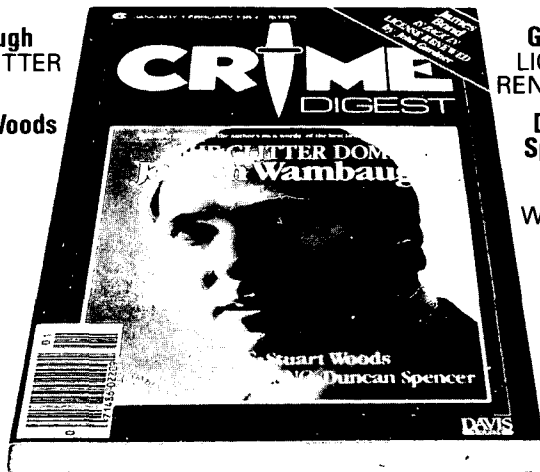
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VOLUME 27, NO. 5      MAY, 1982

**alfred**

# HITCHCOCK'S

**mystery magazine**

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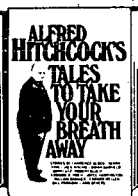
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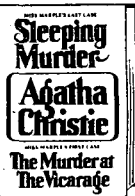
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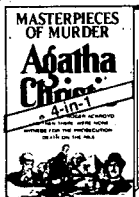
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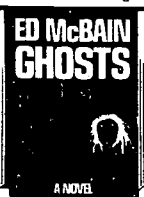
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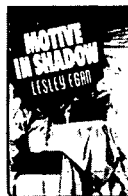
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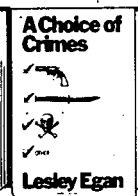
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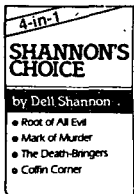
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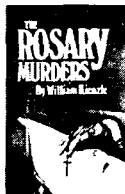
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Dear Readers:



First—you have not missed an issue. If you are wondering why the last issue of AHMM carried a cover date of March 31st, whereas this one is dated May; and think something must have happened to the April issue, it didn't. We just decided to call the April 28th issue May instead.

Not that it's as whimsical as that sounds. It all has to do with making life easier for those of you who buy AHMM at newsstands and magazine racks, and for the newsdealers who sell them there. From now on, we'll be using a monthly designation instead of a day-of-the-week one (except for the thirteenth issue; it will be called, this year, the Mid-September issue).

Our circulation department tells us we know what we're doing. And that all AHMM's subscribers should be assured that they definitely won't come up one short; we've spoken to the computer about the change and it's agreed to everything.

We are very pleased to be able to make an early announcement, that of the nominees for the Edgar Award for Best Short Story of 1981. The Edgar is the top award in this country for excellence in mystery and crime writing; to win an Edgar is to win a great prize indeed. In the short story category alone, for example, more than four hundred stories are considered—virtually all those published during the preceding year. Past winners have included John Collier, Roald Dahl, Stanley Ellin, Edward D. Hoch, Clark Howard, Shirley Jackson, and Ruth Rendell, to name only a few. Edgars are given for the single best work in ten categories: Novel; First Novel; Fact Crime; Short Story; Motion Picture; TV Series; TV Feature; Paperback; Critical, Biographical, or Autobiographical Study; and Juvenile Novel.

As you have probably guessed, the Edgar—a porcelain bust—is named after Edgar Allan Poe, father of the detective story, and its official name is the Edgar Allan Poe Award. The awards are sponsored by the Mystery Writers of America, a 36-year-old organization whose full membership is limited to published mystery and crime writers. (There are associate and affiliate memberships for editors, critics, and the like.) Scrolls are awarded to the runners-up, and there are Ravens for various special achievements.

The prizes are announced at an MWA banquet in New York in the spring—May 7th this year—an entertaining affair crammed with hundreds of mystery writers, editors, agents, et al.

The nominations are not yet in for most of the categories, but the short story most immediately captures our attention anyway, since we take a considerable pride in the accomplishments of the writers for this magazine. Last year's nominees, for instance, were all names familiar to you from these pages: William Bankier, John Lutz, Edward D. Hoch, and Clark Howard (who won), the first two for AHMM stories, the second two for stories in EQMM. And so we are glad to be able to list the nominees for Best Short Story of 1981:

Nan Hamilton, "Seeds of Murder," AHMM

Donald Olson, "A Token of Appreciation," AHMM

Jack Ritchie, "The Absence of Emily," EQMM

Ernest Savage, "The Miracle Day," EQMM

Robert Twohy, "Mousie," EQMM

Our heartiest congratulations to them all—we'll keep you posted.

Many thanks to those of you who have written in, in response to our February editorial. The letters have all been helpful and thoughtful. We will start a Q&A and Letters column soon (more about that later) and will print some of them then. Do keep writing. You give us a good idea of AHMM vis-à-vis its readers, which is, of course, why we're all here.

Cathleen Jordan  
*Editor*

Joel Davis, President & Publisher  
Cathleen Jordan, Editor

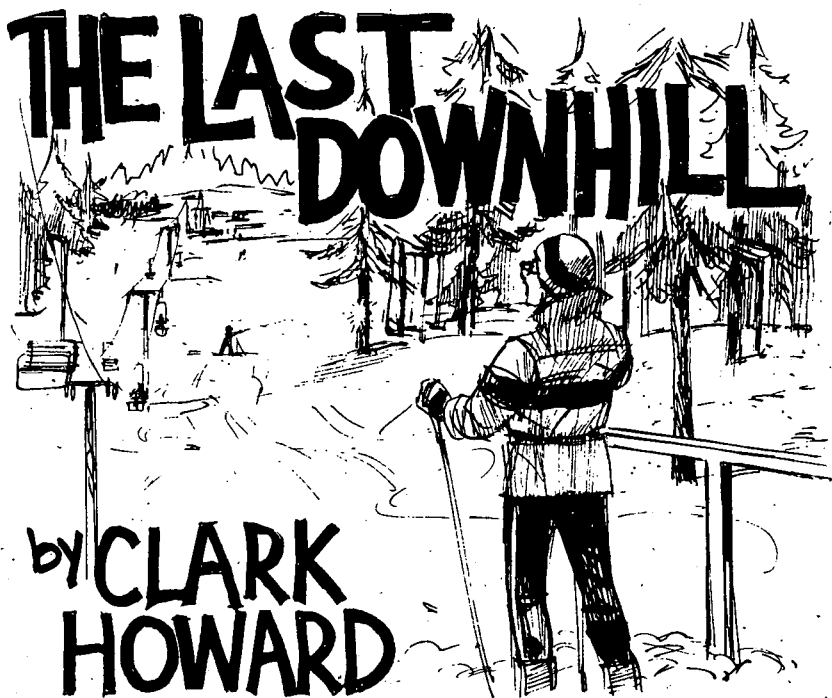
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*Harlow was, he had thought, the last skier of the season. Last except for the strangely familiar man in the red ski cap on the slopes below.*



**H**arlow carried his skis to the base of the lower chair lift and sat down on a bench to put them on.

"Well, Mr. Harlow," said Jerry, the lift operator, "you're almost the last one at the lodge this season. Nearly everyone else has left."

"I'm not *almost* the last," Harlow corrected. "I *am* the last."

"Not quite," said Jerry. "A new guest checked in last night."

Harlow locked on his right ski. "New guest? Who?"



"Don't know. Haven't even seen him. But Mr. Boles called from the desk and said to keep the lift running after you went up; said the new guest would be going up, too."

Harlow stood up and tensed his toes and arch, adjusting the fit. "Did Boles say what the new guest's name was?"

"No, sir. But that looks like him coming now." Jerry bobbed his chin toward the 300-yard trail that led from the lodge to the lift.

Harlow squinted toward the moving figure. The man's gait looked vaguely familiar—or was he just imagining it? "Kind of unusual for someone to check in on the last day of the season, isn't it?"

Jerry shrugged. "Skiers are like golfers, Mr. Harlow; sometimes they don't know when to quit. No offense."

Harlow stared at the advancing figure for another few seconds, then said, "Get the lift moving. I'm ready."

He dropped onto the first chair that swung by and settled into it for the ten-minute trip up to the first ridge. On the way up, he twisted to look back down at the lone figure moving toward the lift base. He couldn't get it out of his mind that the walk was familiar. Could it possibly be one of them?

Alan?

Pudge?

Leo?

The four of them had grown up on skis. When they were eight and ten, they had easily mastered the junior runs around Moose Head, where they all lived. At twelve and fourteen they were experts on the intermediate slopes. By the time they were sixteen, they were better than most adults and the great high runs from the unseen summits were as familiar to them as their own bedrooms. Everyone in town talked about how they constantly tried to out-do one another, and how they were so equal in skill it was hard to tell them apart on the upper snowfields. Even Pudge, who was twenty pounds overweight, held his own in dexterity and maneuverability with his leaner, trimmer companions.

Pudge was Harlow's cousin; Alan and Leo were not related to them, but the four had grown up closer than brothers, practically inseparable. Over the years they had done everything together: played Pop Warner football and American Legion baseball, built a treehouse, gone to see *Shane* nine times, rode a freight train down the mountain to Salinas and

hitchhiked back, worked the fruit groves during the summer, the ski runs on weekends during the school year. And in everything they were as near equal as possible. Four young colts in a dead-heat every time they left the gate.

Then, in their senior year of high school, Harlow pulled ahead of them by just an edge. On the slopes. Alan, Pudge, and Leo noticed it first, then the rest of the town. On the downhill runs, Harlow became just a shade better.

At the first ridge, Harlow dropped out of the chair and pushed over to the edge to look down. Back at the base he could see the other man just getting into a chair for the ride up. Even if it was one of them, he thought, what would it matter? He had a ten-minute lead and was better than any of them.

He'd been better since they were all seventeen years old. Better all through the decade of their twenties. And their thirties. And now, at forty-one, he was still better. None of them could catch him on the downhill. Especially on the high ones where he could pick up speed and momentum.

He pushed over to the self-operated control box for the middle lift that went up to the second ridge, another fifteen minutes higher. Activating it, he slipped into the first chair across the pad and started his second ascent. Looking back, he could see that the man coming up on the lower lift had put on a bright red ski cap.

Alan, he thought. Alan had always worn bright red ski caps. Usually ones that Marcy had knitted for him. Marcy was the head cheerleader their last year in high school. Her family had moved to the mountains from Kansas, so she didn't know how to ski. Everybody said she looked like Debbie Reynolds. She and Alan were steadies. Harlow, Pudge, and Leo were forever trying to get Alan to tell them whether he'd made it with Marcy or not, but Alan would never say. Pudge and Leo did not think he had; Harlow disagreed with them. Harlow was sure Marcy was not a virgin. But he had to wait until two years after they graduated to prove it.

Harlow had stopped in at the drugstore where Marcy worked, the day after Alan left for the army.

"So old Alan is a soldier-boy now," he said, drinking a fountain Coke.

"Hup-two-three-four."

"Don't joke about it," Marcy said, wiping off the marble countertop. "I just hope he doesn't get hurt."

"He'll be all right," Harlow assured her. "It's just a police action, not a real war. More like guard duty. Old Alan will come marching home in a couple of years and you two can get married and start making babies." As Marcy bent over the counter, Harlow got a glimpse down her dress. "You know, Marce, Alan and I are best friends. He asked me to look after you while he was gone."

Marcy gave him a dubious look. "Sure he did."

"No, listen, really, I'm serious. He said he wanted to make sure you didn't just sit around bored all the time. He asked me to take you to a movie now and then. But I've got a better idea than that."

"I'll bet you have."

"Be serious, Marce. You know how Alan was always going to teach you how to ski, but you two never seemed to get around to it? Well, what if I was to teach you while he was away? Wouldn't that be a great surprise for him when he came home?"

Marcy beamed. "Why, that's a wonderful idea!"

"Yeah. You two could really have fun on the slopes together. What do you say?"

She said yes, and that had been the start of it with them.

Harlow took her out every weekend. He patiently worked her on the beginners' run; patiently worked her on the longer intermediate slopes; patiently worked her on the gradual bowls and the easy snowfields; and patiently worked her into bed with him one Saturday night nearly a year after Alan had left.

"God, I'm so ashamed," she said when it was over.

"I don't see why. You've obviously done it before."

"Only with Alan. And we're going to be married."

Harlow took her in his arms. "Come on now. This is 1955. The world is growing up. What you and I do can't hurt anyone. Alan will never know."

And he probably never would have. Except that Marcy became pregnant. And Harlow arranged for her to go to San Francisco to an abortionist. Abortions were still being done on kitchen tables in 1955. That was where Marcy died: on a kitchen table.

When Alan got back from the army and learned all the details, he swore

he'd kill Harlow. But by that time, Harlow had left town.

At the upper ridge, Harlow dropped out of the chair and turned at once to look back down to the lower ridge. The other man on the lift had reached the lower ridge five minutes before Harlow reached the upper, and Harlow was anxious to see if he was coming any higher. He was not; he was standing next to the control box, one hand on it, looking up at Harlow. I'm fifteen minutes ahead of him now instead of ten, Harlow thought. That had always been very important to Harlow: staying a comfortable distance ahead of other people.

He watched as the figure below kept staring up at him. Then, in a movement that made Harlow involuntarily shiver, the man waved to him. Actually waved. Raised one hand and gave it a little twist of the wrist.

Just like Pudge used to do. Harlow's mouth went dry as he saw the man activate the middle lift and hop onto a chair to come up.

Pudge? Could it actually be Pudge? Could he have dried out, come back from the depths of alcoholism, got himself in shape again, and gone back to the skis?

Harlow grunted softly. Not that it mattered. Pudge could not catch him anyway. Could not even keep up with him. Never had been able to.

Harlow's father and Pudge's father had been brothers. They and their wives had been killed in a jet crash on the way to Bermuda. A third brother, Harlow and Pudge's Uncle Thomas, had been made their guardian until they came of age. Thomas was a bachelor, in the lumber business back in Michigan. He took their insurance money and made both boys his partners. Pudge went off to college to learn accounting, but Harlow, who had never liked school, went right to work in the lumber mill. He stayed at Uncle Thomas's right side: in the forest, cutting and sawing; on the lakes, sending the wood downstream; at the mill, grading, processing; and by the time Pudge got his degree and returned, Harlow knew as much about the business as Uncle Thomas did.

"You ought to let me take over for you, Uncle," Harlow told the older man. "Let me do the work. You'll still get your third. What's the matter, don't you think I can do it?"

"You could do it, all right," his uncle said. "But I'd be afraid of the shortcuts you like to take. I've seen you order trees cut that needed another year of growth; seen you grade wood high when it should've been

graded low; seen you sell outside our contracts for a kickback. Your ethics need to mature a little, my boy. You need to develop a sense of values beyond immediate profit. I expect it'll be a while before I can let you take over."

Uncle Thomas was an ex-lumberjack and a hard-drinking man. Pudge, Harlow learned, had also developed a taste for hard liquor while at college. Uncle Thomas and Pudge started drinking together. Before long it became a common sight to see the older man and his nephew at a corner table in the big saloon near the mill. Sometimes they could even be seen stumbling out together, arm-in-arm.

One bitterly cold January night, as Uncle Thomas and Pudge were walking along the dock on their way home, a six-foot log rolled off the top of the next day's load and knocked them both into the icy lake. Some other customers from the saloon heard their cries and managed to pull Pudge out; but Uncle Thomas got caught under an ice floe and drowned. No one was ever able to figure out how just one log got loose from the chained stack.

After Harlow and Pudge inherited the business, Harlow took over running it while Pudge mostly just kept on drinking. Pudge blamed himself for Uncle Thomas's death, and Harlow did nothing to dissuade him from the notion. The more Pudge stayed drunk, the better Harlow liked it. Eventually Harlow went to court and had Pudge committed to a sanatorium for alcoholics, and Pudge's half of the business put under his guardianship. Harlow heard some years later that Pudge had been convinced by a psychiatrist that he was blameless in Uncle Thomas's death, and Pudge had even subsequently hinted to some friends that he suspected Harlow of letting loose the log that hit them. That kind of talk did not bother Harlow, however. By then he had disposed of the lumber business, absorbed Pudge's share, and moved on to new pastures.

Harlow activated the upper lift and took a chair all the way to the summit of the mountain. It was a ten-minute ride and when he reached the top he looked back and saw the other man just getting off at the second ridge. He was still a good ten minutes ahead of him. As soon as the man—whoever he was—boarded the upper lift and got far enough above the ridge to prevent his jumping out of the chair, Harlow would push off and start down the run. As fast as he was on the downhill, and as familiar as he had become with the slopes during the past three weeks,

he would be back on the bottom, at the lodge, packed and in his car, by the time this man—who would have to take it very slowly—got halfway down.

Harlow pushed over to the guardrail and waited. And watched. The man in the red cap stood right where Harlow had stood a few minutes earlier, except that he was looking up instead of down. He made no move to activate the upper lift, which had stopped as soon as Harlow had dropped off at the summit. He didn't seem to be in any hurry, Harlow thought. He was just looking up at Harlow, and looking around at the sky and the terrain, from where he was up to where Harlow was. Okay, sport, take your time, Harlow thought. I can wait it out as long as you can.

Harlow looked at the sky, too. It was slate-blue, solid and clear, with a dazzling high-altitude sun. The temperature, he guessed, was in the mid-twenties, the air thin and exhilarating. It had snowed during the early morning and from the summit it looked as if there was a whole mountain of untracked powder. It was a beautiful sight, one that Harlow would have enjoyed immensely had it not been for the other man down on the ridge.

Looking back down, Harlow's eyes widened as he saw the figure bend and scoop up enough fresh snow for a snowball. The man rolled it over and over, packing it tighter between his mittened hands; then he tossed it up, caught it once, and threw it at a nearby ponderosa. It hit the tree dead-center and splattered.

Harlow watched transfixed. It's Leo, he thought. It had to be Leo. A thousand times as a boy he had seen Leo do that exact same thing: make a snowball, toss it up and catch it first, then hit a tree dead-center.

When Harlow sold the lumber business, he moved to Minneapolis and became a building contractor. It seemed like the natural thing to do. Several retail lumber dealers who had bought his inferior grades of wood were in Minneapolis, so he knew who to do business with. He had plenty of capital; all he really needed was a front man. He put in a long distance call to his old boyhood pal, Leo.

"Harlow, where the hell are you?" Leo asked, surprised. "Quite a few people are looking for you: Marcy's two brothers, Alan, Pudge and his lawyers—"

"Never mind who's looking for me, Leo. What are you doing in the

way of work these days?"

"Working uptown at Walgreen's. I'm the assistant manager," Leo said proudly.

"A drugstore clerk!" Harlow scoffed.

"It's not a bad job," Leo said defensively. "Got some nice fringe benefits."

"Yeah, free razor blades. Listen, Leo, how would you like to make some serious money? I'm about to go into a new business where I really don't know anybody. I need a right-hand man, somebody I can trust. Are you interested?"

"Is it legal?"

"Of course it's legal," Harlow said, trying to sound indignant.

Leo was interested. Harlow swore him to secrecy, then told him where he was. He sent Leo enough money for him and his family to leave town quietly. After Leo joined Harlow in Minneapolis, they established Prestige Homes and started purchasing land. Soon they began to erect a tract of townhouses in the \$75,000 range.

"You're the organized one, Leo, so I'm putting you in charge of running the general office," Harlow told him. "I'm going to be out in the field supervising the construction, ordering materials, and that sort of thing. I'll also be doing the selling and promoting, so I won't have any time for paperwork. You handle the money for us; I'll pass invoices on to you and you can see that they get paid."

Leo was gratified at his responsible position. He was also impressed with the expertise Harlow showed in establishing the business, acquiring the land and building permits, subcontracting the surveying and all the necessary craftsmen, and personally ordering the lumber and all the other materials needed. It pleased him to see how much everyone liked Harlow, and how well he treated all the people associated with Prestige Homes. Leo began to think that the people back home who spoke badly of Harlow were very much mistaken about him.

"I was as leery of this move as you were at first," he told his wife after they had been in Minneapolis a month, "but now I think it's going to work out just fine. Can you believe Harlow's paying me *three* times what I was getting at the drugstore? I really don't mind buying my razor blades at all!"

Business boomed. People bought the townhouses as fast as the bank would approve their loans. Within four months the first ones were com-



pleted, the city safety inspector approved them for occupancy, and families began to move in.

At every opportunity, Harlow praised Leo for his work. "Bringing you into this business was the smartest move I ever made," he said with a pat on the back. "The way you've run this office has been more help than you can image. I've been able to devote my time to the building and selling without a single worry about the office procedure and the paperwork. Speaking of paperwork, incidentally, we topped off six more units yesterday. Sign these certificates of completion for me, will you?"

Leo was so accustomed by then to signing reams of paper every week that he did it without a second thought. The certificates of completion were statements attesting that all top-grade materials had been used in the construction of the townhouses: top-grade lumber, cement mix, wiring, and plumbing. The certificates were filed with the city safety office when a final safety inspection was requested. The final inspection was a cursory one: carpets laid properly, heating apparatus vented properly, electrical outlets capped—that sort of thing. The important inspections were supposed to have been done during construction, when the inspector could see the cement mix, the wiring, the pipes—and the lumber. But the inspector who conducted those inspections was driving a new car, a gift from Harlow.

Sometimes inferior materials in a home go undetected for years. Second-grade lumber, for instance, might take a decade to deteriorate, and then present no more serious a problem than some minor refurbishing. But in the case of the Prestige Homes townhouses, the builder—and one buyer—were not so lucky. Thirty-seven days after the Lemmer family moved into Unit Number 268, the landing between the first and second floors collapsed and killed Mr. Lemmer.

It was the biggest building scandal to hit Minneapolis in years. Construction was ordered suspended at once. State investigators arrived to inspect some still unfinished units. Samples of the low-grade lumber being used were impounded. The city inspector who had approved for occupancy the Lemmer dwelling was suspended. Harlow and Leo were both indicted by a grand jury.

At the subsequent trial it was shown by Harlow's attorney that at no time had he ever put his signature on any document connected with Prestige—not an order, an invoice, a check, a sub-contract, a sales contract, or (most important) a certificate of completion. It had all been Leo,

right down the line. Leo had signed the order for low-grade lumber; Leo had paid for it; and Leo had signed the certificate attesting that *high*-grade lumber had been used in the Lemmer townhome. Clearly, Leo was the culprit.

Harlow was acquitted. Leo got eight years.

So now Leo's back, Harlow thought, looking down from the summit of the ski run. The man in the red cap was still on the middle ridge, looking up at him. Harlow grunted softly. It was obvious to him what Leo planned to do. Wait on the middle ridge until Harlow started his downhill run, then push off the ridge and intercept him somewhere halfway down the mountain. Clever. But not clever enough.

Or was it? Harlow looked behind him, past the back side of the mountain. On the horizon, clearly visible, was a line of black that looked like dirty fumes from an exhaust.

A storm.

Damn, Harlow thought. One of those early spring snowstorms that came out of nowhere. Very cold, very quiet, little or no wind. He could not tell how fast it was moving—but surely it would be over the run to the lodge within an hour.

He looked back down at Leo. Or was it Pudge? No, it was Leo. The waiting game was definitely on Leo's side: he could simply stay on the ridge until the storm forced Harlow to make a downhill run.

Harlow wet his dry, cold lips. Pushing over, he looked down the back side of the mountain. He saw a long, easy run down a gently sloping bowl that dropped about a thousand feet to a tree line. Beyond that, although he could not see it, was probably another run, perhaps two or three, the rest of the way down. At the bottom would be the highway, going around the base of the mountain to the lodge. Harlow smiled. Suppose he were to ski down the back side before Pudge—Leo, that is—even knew he was off the summit? Once he made it to the highway, it would be easy to pick up a ride around to the lodge. Leo would think he was still up on the summit. And by the time he became suspicious enough to ride the upper lift to the top to see for himself, Harlow could be back at the lodge and on the road.

Harlow again looked across the sky where the storm was brewing. Definitely moving this way, he told himself. Got to decide one way or another.

He pushed back to the summit rail and looked down at the ridge again. The red cap was still clearly visible, not moving.

Okay, Harlow made up his mind, the back side it is then. He stood at the rail for several moments, long enough to be seen. Then he pushed away, buttoned the collar of his ski jacket, and put his mittens back on. After staying out of sight for five minutes, he moved back to the rail and let himself be seen again. By then he was sure that Leo was used to his disappearing for several minutes at a time.

So long, chump, he thought as he pushed away for the last time. He slid quickly to the back lip of the summit, paused just seconds to put his goggles in place and close his face flap, and pushed skillfully over the edge.

The entire back side of the mountain was an uninterrupted sheet of untracked powder, the top few inches still loose from its early-morning fall. As Harlow made his run, high, billowing plumes of snow curled up in his wake. It was a magnificent run, one of the best of his life. It had been a long time since he had felt such elation.

At the bottom of the run, near the first tree line, he turned into a smooth, professional halt and looked around. He was on a flat meadow, or maybe a frozen pond, about a fourth of the way down. There was no other run in sight. Beyond the stand of trees, he thought: that's where it's likely to be. He pushed forward across the level ground, toward the trees. Before he got to them, his shadow suddenly vanished from in front of him. Looking up, he saw that the first small dark clouds of the storm had arrived; one of them had blotted out the sun.

Pushing onward, he reached the trees, zigzagged through them—finding that they were very shallow—and cleared them on the other side. And there was the next run, a shorter one, leading down to the next lower ridge. Just as he started to push off, a glimpse of color caught his attention. He looked up at one of the ridges above the trees—and saw a figure in a red cap cutting down a narrow, twisting run like a professional. What the hell—? That couldn't be Leo, he thought. Or Pudge. Neither of them had ever developed lower leg movements that good. He frowned deeply. Alan? Had it been Alan all along? Of course, the red ski cap—

Without further thought, Harlow went over the side. It was an easy run, high but not steep, not long enough to make him winded. Halfway down he ran into snow: large, wet flakes, drifting straight down. When he reached the next ridge, he was immediately aware that it was becoming

noticeably colder. He glided into a brace of sapling pines and moved under their umbrella boughs to rest.

But he did not rest long. Above him, still moving swiftly toward him, was Leo. Or rather, Alan.

Harlow pushed off the ridge onto the next run. It was longer than the second one, but still not as long as the first. As he plunged downward, he became aware that the sun was completely blocked out now, with only the gray daylight left; and the falling snow was thickening around him like a white curtain. Halfway down the run, the snow became so heavy that for most of a minute he was actually skiing blind. He had never done that before; it gave him an eerie feeling.

He was in a half-crouch, leaning to his right, when he hit the tree. It caught him between the shoulder and elbow, and spun him all the way around, knocking him flat. There was a sharp *craaaack!* sound and for a terrible, frightening moment he was afraid one of his skis had broken. Ignoring his throbbing arm, he pushed himself erect and threw his goggles up to examine the skis. They were both all right. He swallowed dryly: thank God.

He looked around. He was on a level ridge trail that wound through a thick stand of ponderosas, very tall ponderosas, close to fifty feet he estimated. Blocked by the high branches, the snow was not falling as heavily where he stood. It was as if he were in a huge, silent tent, absolutely white except for the poker-straight trees that held up its roof. His eyes were watering. Pulling off one mitten, he wiped them with his fingers. As he put the mitten back on, he saw the red ski cap again.

It was coming toward him through the trees, a slowly moving spot of color in a sea of pure white. He sucked in his breath. Alan? Pudge? Leo? Who the hell was it? But, he thought, it made no difference who it was. No difference at all. He had to escape from whomever it was. He had to run. . . .

He looked down at the ground. The falling snow, even as light as it was in the trees, had already covered up his tracks and his ski poles, which were still on the ground. If he moved now, he would make fresh tracks and could be followed. But if he stayed where he was, if he *hid* . . .

Next to where Harlow stood, there was a twelve-foot drift banked up against a tall ponderosa. He unlocked his skis and knelt beside the drift. He tried to dig with both hands but his right arm was too sore to move it, so he used his left hand only, scooping out a cave in the drift. When

he had dug it large enough to squeeze into, he turned and sat back in it, knees drawn up in front of him. He glanced at his skis; they were almost covered with fresh snow. And the newly falling flakes were beginning to cover him also, camouflaging him in his cave.

Squinting, Harlow searched for the red ski cap. He saw it: off to the left at about ten o'clock, some fifteen yards away. It was impossible, because of the falling snow, to see any more of the figure; just the bright red cap. With maddening slowness, it moved across in front of him. Ten o'clock, twelve o'clock, two o'clock. Then it disappeared into the whiteness. Harlow chuckled to himself. Fool.

His right arm was throbbing and he carefully touched it. Through the ski jacket he could feel massive swelling. So that was what the cracking sound had been: his arm.

He blinked his eyelids, which were becoming heavy with snow. He wanted to get up and get back on his skis, but somehow he could not manage it. With his left hand he reached out of the cave and stuck his mittened fingers into the fresh layer of snow. There was about three inches of it, which meant it was falling at the rate of nine or ten inches an hour. That discovery, and the sensation that he was growing very warm, made him realize suddenly that he had to get out; he had to have help.

"Alan!" he yelled.

No answer.

"Pudge!"

No answer.

"Leo!"

No answer.

He called their names over and over for half an hour.

Then the white world became silent again.

In the coffee shop at the lodge, Collins, the mountain ranger, tossed his red ski cap on the counter and warmed his hands around a mug of steaming chocolate.

"Anything from the highway crew?" Boles asked him.

"Nothing," Collins replied. "He didn't make it down, I'm afraid." He sighed heavily. "Damn! I came so *close* to catching him. You know, I thought it was my imagination when I first saw the guy. In all the years I've been coming down from the lookout cabin on those back slopes, that's

the first time I ever saw another skier. Was he the only one up there today?"

"No, that fellow at the front table went up, too. Only to the second ridge, though. He had intended going all the way to the summit but he hadn't been on skis for a while. After giving it some thought, he came on down the two lower runs."

"Smart," said Collins. He glanced at the man, at the ordinary red ski cap similar to his own lying next to the man's plate. "Who is he anyway?"

The lodge manager shrugged. "Just a salesman. Name's Phil Casey. Car threw a rod. It's laid up in Hickey's Garage; he sent to Sacramento for a part. Said he thought as long as he was stranded, he might as well get in a little skiing. Only got to do the one downhill run, though, before the storm hit. Tough luck."

"Better luck than the other fellow had," Collins commented.

He wondered if the other skier had frozen to death yet, and sipped at his steaming chocolate.



*Only Charley's family knew the secret of the grave.*

# GERONIMO'S COIT



by **MIKE M'SING**

The universe no longer met my standards. Southwest America's high and dry landscape, where for barely a week I'd basked in the balmy afterglow of late success and the shiny promise of more to come, had been clouded.

Oh, I hadn't expected life to be perfect forever. I knew when a fellow plays detective he should count, let us say, on being bludgeoned unconscious from time to time. And I'd heard that getting credit for another party's homicidal skills is as common as a leggy blonde stinking up the



office with gardenia scent.

But my fix was far less fair than those, and it seemed stickier: Uncle Len was poking his ample nose into my case.

Not that I dislike Len, you understand. Quite the opposite.

Nor is Len the sort of relative to foul up an investigation. He's wise, and brainy, and knowledgeable.

That, in fact, was the problem. Len can never be astonished by one of my conclusions, like the plodding assistants other detectives enjoy humiliating.

I learned that on my first case. When Len sat in on my solution of the century-old riddle of the Mineral King silver mines, he revealed a nearly perfect inability to be surprised by my powers. He even performed useful tricks of his own, and helped me solve the case. Though Len's suggestions were practical, his help hurt my feeling of self-reliance.

My book on the Mineral King Mines prompted kind words from the nation's remaining literates, though. It sold fairly well, and even the Internal Revenue Service approved my deductions.

Lately I'd managed to forget all about Len's hand in my silver solution. For barely a week now I'd sniffed about Brinton, Arizona, immersed in the second mystery of my young career as a free-lance writer. I was sure I could solve solo the disappearance of Geronimo's Colt, and I generously shared this view with the residents of the Sulfur Creek Indian Reservation. I was never too busy to explain to any of the locals how I'd cracked my first case. The children, who are very polite, listened at length without nodding off. I was enjoying it immensely.

Then, on the morning of September 19, as I was tucking into scrambled eggs at Brinton's finest and only coffee shop, a man in khakis sat down in the only empty chair—the one next to me.

"Writing must pay pretty well if you can afford breakfast at restaurants," he said, and I knew without a glance who it was.

I glanced anyway. Len's swarthy face bore the beatific half smile our meetings always bring. His khakis were clean but worn shiny, as was the ancient green cap he wore.

Not the picture of a man who's independently well-off for life, I thought, but there's always more to Len than meets the eye. At the moment he looked like an unassuming, middle-aged farmer from Oklahoma, which he is.

You'd have to know Len very well to recognize him as the winner of

the La Salle Posthumous Riddle Contest, or as a man who's rhymed "orange" in at least two limericks.

"I guess my postcard was more interesting than I thought," I said.

"Intriguing," he said, pulling the card I'd sent him from his shirt pocket while I shovelled the last forkloads of egg into my face. Len read the card:

"In reservation doing piece on Geronimo's Colt. It's missing. Grave robber in coma, looks suspect. Hospital threatened. More later. Mike. It's later now."

"I see how that could make you curious," I replied, trying to catch the waitress's eye. The young ones never remember the pie. "Sorry I didn't explain it better, Uncle, and thanks for coming."

It seemed best to unstick my fix at once. A frontal maneuver looked like the only course, even if it did risk offending a revered uncle. I took a deep breath and plunged ahead.

"I've got a pretty good grip on the case. I don't really need any help. Before we go any further, make me a promise: Let me work this one alone. Please don't make any suggestions. Don't tell me any of those facts you're always reading about. Let me correct my own errors. Feel free to tag along. Sniff around to your heart's content. But please keep your deductions quiet. Agreed?"

It was easier than I'd expected.

"Sure. Now what's this about?"

"Geronimo's Colt is the plated .45-caliber Peacemaker revolver the old chief used in his raids. Almost a century ago it went into his secret gravesite, up in those mountains." I gestured at a pair of rocky peaks on the horizon to the northeast, visible through the coffee shop's picture window.

"Lately the people on the reservation have been working to build a clinic. They got a goodly bunch of contributions after a ten-year-old girl died on her way to a hospital in Tombstone. She could have been saved if there'd been a clinic on the reservation. The final sum to put the fundraising over the top was to come from the sale of the revolver.

"A week ago, on the twelfth, the tribal council voted to take the gun from the grave and auction it. The only member of the council to vote against the sale was Charley Sunflower. He said it was 'ghoulish.' At the time no one questioned Charley's sincerity. It seems his family carries the secret of the grave's location. Since he'd already promised to abide by the council's decision, whatever it was, their vote put him in charge

of robbing Geronimo's grave.

"Just recently, though, some of the Indians have started to wonder about Charley's motives. On the thirteenth Charley's wife and his son-in-law, John Fox, returned home after a four-day visit to a sick relation. John knew something wasn't right when he saw the curtains were wide open, letting the afternoon sun shine in and overheat the house. None of the neighbors had seen Charley's truck since the council meeting. There's a desk calendar from the town real estate office in Charley's house. The leaf for the twelfth was gone, so John figures Charley left on the thirteenth. The morning of the fifteenth, when Charley hadn't returned, and no fire had been seen up on the ridge, John rode his pony up the jeep trail to the draw between those peaks.

"He found Charley sprawled on the ground beside the truck. There was a nasty gash on the old fellow's head. Charley was wearing a knapsack, but the revolver was nowhere to be found. Later John searched the truck. All he discovered was water and fixings for a meal."

"No flashlight?"

"Why . . . uh, no." I wondered what that was about. Maybe Len was thinking of likely weapons.

"While John was driving his father-in-law to the hospital the old boy came to and spoke a few words." I took a notebook from my pocket and read what John Fox had quoted to me: " 'Sun blinded me. Stumbled on rock. Gun fell by red rock, lightning-forked pine. Hit head. Money . . . Now I won't get money.' "

I paused and looked at Len. If he was the slightest bit curious, I'd be able to astound him with my deductive skill.

"What is it makes Charley look suspicious?" Perfect.

"First, his own words. They don't hold together. If Charley was blinded by the sun in his eyes, how could he know where the gun landed? Even if he hadn't been blinded by the sun, it would take rare concentration to watch the gun flying through the air instead of looking where he was going to fall. Then there's that curious statement about money. He didn't say, 'Now the clinic won't get money,' or 'The council won't get money,' or 'We won't get money.' He said 'I.'

"Second, some of the people from the reservation claim there was a stranger—a white man—talking to Charley in town the day before the council voted. If Charley wanted to talk to a visitor, why meet him in town rather than on the reservation? Unless, of course, Charley had

something up his blanket and he didn't want to be seen with a collector—a shady collector determined to get the gun for himself without caring how.

"Third, there's Charley's disappearance. No one saw him drive up to that ridge, so it seems likely he took a roundabout approach. Why sneak up there if he weren't doing something crooked, accompanied by an outsider?"

"Fourth, there's the wound. If a man trips over a rock while walking and he falls, his momentum will carry him forward. He'll probably brace himself some way from reflex action. He may twist sideways enough to injure the side of his head. But Charley's arms weren't bruised, his palms weren't barked, and there was a blow to the *back* of his head strong enough to put him in a coma."

"Your conclusion?"

"Charley went up there with a collector, in a secret deal. The collector waited down at the road while Charley took the revolver from the grave. When Charley came back down the collector—Mr. X—clobbered him and left him for dead."

"I can see you're a lot more clever than you were when you started trying to puzzle out those California silver mines. You think up possibilities beyond the obvious face of things."

My face beamed like a sunrise, though not so red. Flattery fails to embarrass me nowadays, even from so unexpected a source as my Uncle Len, but it does please me. The universe was a fair place, after all.

Len stared out the window as I tackled the waitress. The pie was a mistake. The waitress was married. The coffee wasn't bad.

After breakfast Len and I drove to the town's car dealership, which was also the car rental office. He dropped off the rented car he'd driven from the Tucson airport and chatted with the proprietor about the hubbub over Geronimo's Colt.

"Real pity," the redheaded entrepreneur said as Len counted out the rental balance. This was a hearty, rotund fellow with a face nearly as crimson as his receding mane. "People on the reservation really need that clinic. I gave what I could, like every businessman in town. Now it's up in the air. No telling when that clinic will be built, if it is."

"Did you happen to know Charley Sunflower?" Len asked.

"Sure, old Charley was one of my first customers when I opened this place. That was twenty years ago now. Hope he pulls through."

Len put the change in his wallet.

"Old Charley was in here just a couple of days before he went up to that ridge, pricing a new van."

Len's eyebrows rose. "A van?"

"Yep. He must have come into some money lately. He wanted a new V8 with a load of options: roll bars, split rims, four-wheel drive, special suspension, heater, air conditioner—the works."

"Hope he'll get to drive it," Len said, and we left. "Where to now?" he asked, as we boarded my old camper.

That brought me up short. Len's praise at breakfast had lulled me into such overpowering complacency I'd forgotten the missing relic still was missing. "I don't know. We should try to run down Charley's visitor, I guess. Check the motel register, try to get better descriptions from the people who saw him."

"That might prove worth your time. Did the Indian Police look over the ground where Charley got his skull altered?"

"They haven't been brought into it. They're left free to give their full attention to the vandals who raid archaeological sites."

Len nodded knowingly. Charley's tribesmen didn't want outsiders brought into reservation affairs. The police might be Indians, but they still were police.

"Maybe we could visit Charley's family, see if they need any help. Is his wife here?"

"She's staying in Tombstone to be near him."

"The son-in-law, then?"

I nodded and wheeled the van northwest out of town, toward the reservation. The motel register wouldn't be going anyplace.

Spidery green ocotillo plants whizzed past magically, like green dandelion seeds in a gale, and the engine hummed hypnotically. After half an hour we turned northeast from the two-lane asphalt onto a gravel road. Dust rose behind us to curtain off the world of televisions and computers as the van rattled up a gradual rise.

An hour's jostling brought us to a cluster of simple houses with their curtains drawn against the heat of the desert sunshine. Cottonwoods and palo verdes shaded the residents, who waved as we passed. I waved back. The road passed among the houses, past the trading post and meeting hall, past the stakes marking the lot for the proposed clinic, to a right turnoff.

This led a half mile down to a cinder block house on the bank of a

seasonal stream. John Fox was standing on the porch to meet us. He nodded at me, and I at him. Len raised his hand in the ancient American salute, and John returned it. Len seemed pleased that some, at least, of the younger generation knew the old amenities.

Len uttered the local word of greeting, which surprised me, though it shouldn't have. Len has a habit of studying up on a new field before he enters it. John repeated the word, and I felt a bit unnecessary introducing the two to one another. Len asked how John's father-in-law fared, and John said he was holding strong. Len said he was glad, as skull fractures could be such dangerous injuries, especially at the top of the back of the head. John said Charley's skull was fractured at the bottom, and Len said he was glad the blow fell there.

John seemed a bit puzzled by this conversation, the more so when Len turned to the cost of hospitals and doctors, and Charley's financial status. I was growing embarrassed, and when Len asked about Charley's land-holdings I edged back toward the van. Our family's Indian ancestors were renowned as a peaceful, diplomatic tribe, most of the time. John's tribe was not.

My unease seemed unfounded, though. Len and John chatted amiably a couple of minutes more as the earth heated like an oven brick under the heightening sun. It was past ten thirty A.M. and I was anxious to feel moving air. To my dismay Len and John entered the house. A few minutes later they emerged. Len walked to Charley's truck, reached inside, then walked around and looked at it from the front. He walked back to the window and reached inside once more, then walked back to my camper, waving goodbye to John Fox.

His act with Charley's old truck puzzled me. As I started my engine I nearly asked what it was about, but I caught myself in time. His answer might bear on the case. I didn't want to be amused by the workings of my uncle's mind, just yet.

As we bumped up toward the road's fork a dust devil swept over the ground a half mile before us, whisking alluvium a hundred feet into the sky. I stopped to watch the whirlwind. It marched up the slope toward the ridge where Charley's head was cracked.

"Reminds me of the fiery pillar leading the Israelites out of the wilderness," Len observed as he lighted his pipe.

We watched in silence as the pillar of dust disappeared into a rocky ravine. It was the first wind I'd seen in five days in this valley, and I

wanted to make the most of it.

"No one's poked around that ridge to see if the revolver could still be there?"

"It seems not."

Somehow the idea of nosing around the streets of Brinton in the midday heat didn't appeal to me just then. The motel clerk might not remember which guest was which. Or the appropriate clerk might be taking days off in Phoenix or Tucson. Or the name and address the collector used could be phony. Maybe he didn't stay at the motel. Maybe he didn't rent a car. Legwork could be a pain in the soles, particularly if it led to thin air. All the more painful if, all the while I tracked Mr. X, the missing revolver were somehow lying in the sun a few yards from where Charley Sunflower parked his truck.

"I've been thinking of having a look-see up there," I said, edging toward an announcement.

Len was silent.

"Might as well do it now, since I'm up this way."

"Hope you won't be hobbled by an old uncle."

"Naw, two heads are better than one. Uh, for searching a crime scene, that is."

We turned north once more, following the road up the creek drainage and past more houses, toward the base of the Dos Cabezas ridge. After a thousand-foot climb the road ended by intersecting the jeep trail, which ran east and west along the base of the ridge. The pine-studded peaks rose another thousand feet above us to the east.

To the south, the reservation buildings were microscopic in the brilliant distance. The town was a mere smudge on the valley floor beyond.

I soon saw why John rode his pony to search for the missing Charley. The jeep trail followed every gullyside, up and down and steeply both ways, barely missing huge boulders and wiry scrub pines. At several spots my two-wheel-drive van needed running starts to get up sharp inclines of dust, and there were no straightaways for good running starts. Near the top of one grade the wheels spun hopelessly in the dust, and I was sure we would slip back downhill and overturn. At the last second the tires hit some bedrock they'd excavated, and we barely chugged over the top. It was cooler up here, but I was sweating.

Len suggested we park and walk the rest of the way. "If my old truck can make that stretch," I replied, "it can make anything." I was right.



We rode the rest of the way without a slip.

It was about noon when we reached the draw between the two peaks, known locally as East Head and West Head. The sun had risen over East Head to glare directly onto West Head and the saddle between them. The gully leading down from the saddle would soon be hot enough to bake biscuits, or hikers.

There was a gentle slope minus trees and boulders on the north edge of the road, so I backed the van up it, then blocked the tires with rocks.

A quick look showed a virgin fire pit and a small stack of firewood. Len sniffed about and found signs nearby of where Charley had parked his truck—tire tracks and four unearthed rocks.

"What now?" he asked.

"I guess it's time to look for the revolver," I said.

"Should I look for a lightning-forked tree?"

"No, I'm discounting that story of Charley's. If the gun's still up here, this is how it must have happened: Charley made a deal with Mr. X, but he didn't want a white man to know where Geronimo's grave is."

"I could tell you . . ." Len started to say, but I cut him short.

"Don't! I really think I can figure this myself: Charley went up there and got the gun, but as he didn't trust our Mr. X, he hid it before he got to the road. He then returned to Mr. X and asked for the money, but he got a crack on the head instead. Mr. X searched Charley's pack, but the gun wasn't in it. He drove away, leaving Charley to die."

That settled that. We searched the slope above the road for an hour, leaving no small rock unturned.

"Not a damn thing," I said at one thirty. "Nothing."

"Just those tracks," Len added.

He took my quizzical expression for permission to explain. "Footprints leading up toward East Head." He led me about fifty yards up the rocky staircase of a gully to a set of tracks which branched off to the right. "Sighted 'em as soon as we parked."

The tracks climbed directly up a slope of deep, bare soil. One impression, in a patch of level soil in the gully, was clear enough to use as evidence.

"Better get a box to put over this," I said and started back down. "We can get some plaster at the reservation and make a cast."

"Bring my pack," Len yelled after me.

I returned with his pack and a small box, which I placed over the

bootprint and weighted with a rock. Never in his life has any newspaperman-turned-writer felt more like a detective. My first plaster footprint was soon to be poured.

Len pulled a small case and a larger one from his pack, then removed the weighted box from the bootprint. The smaller case was a tape measure, which he unspooled to a foot's length and locked. He placed the tape next to the bootprint and opened the larger case, which turned out to be an instant camera. He snapped the shutter and a minute later handed me a sharp photo of the bootprint, complete with scale reference.

"Pretty neat," I said, masking my disappointment.

"Lighter than plaster and water," he said, turning his gaze to the set of tracks up the slope. "Odd," he mumbled.

"What's that?"

"Odd. What goes up must come down, but there's only one set of footprints, leading up."

I had to admit Len had a point. I would have noticed it myself, given time. We trudged along the draw for a hundred yards or so, looking for another track coming down. Nothing. We went back to the bootprints and began tracking.

"Keep your eyes peeled and keep quiet," I warned Len. "Whoever made those tracks should still be up there, and it may be someone who customizes other people's skulls."

He nodded and we plodded up. I sweated profusely as each uphill step in the loose soil slid back under my weight—two steps up, one step down. Pant twice and step again. I wished we were tracking our quarry up the rocky gully, but in that staircase he wouldn't have left tracks enough. A fellow has to count his blessings, however difficult they may be. Two blessings up, one blessing down. Bless, bless.

A couple of hundred yards uphill the bare soil vanished into rock. So did our tracks. We went on up, looking for signs. Within a half hour we stepped onto the stony summit and scanned the panorama. No man showed, nor any forked pine, only breathtaking scenery stretching for dozens of miles.

Len took a canteen from his pack and we drank. After a few minutes' rest he led us west down a ridge which fell to the saddle between the peaks. At one spot the ridge steepened, and we detoured through a deep chute. Len trod slowly and surely, but one of the solid-looking rocks I stepped on rolled underfoot. I shot downhill, yelling as I fell, and regained

my balance just in time to see the rock crash past Len's ankle. The rolling stone tumbled to the bottom of the chute and came to rest against an outcropping of red rock.

"Sorry," I said, still shaking. Silence didn't seem important now.

"Just be glad we're not hurt," Len said mildly.

I went back to retrieve my sweat-soggy hat, which a passing outcrop had lifted from my head. The eagle feather wasn't broken.

Len let me lead. As we headed back toward the ridge I was struck by the abundance of red rock. Then I spied a singleleaf pine forked by lightning. Maybe Charlie had told the truth, after all. We searched again. And again. I even climbed into the tree and felt through every bushy branch. No revolver.

I wondered aloud whether any other lightning-forked pines could be found near red rock on this peak. Len said lightning forks would likely be on a ridge, since lightning tends to strike there.

We plodded down toward the saddle. If Charley's story was true and he left those bootprints, his forked tree should be on this ridge. We didn't find it.

About three thirty we reached the shade of my van, and drank heartily of spring water from the valley.

"Think I'll take a little sightseeing walk," Len said. Before I could warn him that he walked alone he was gone, trudging east along the jeep trail like a tumbleweed in a stiff breeze.

Half an hour later he returned. "All I found was a view of another road to the east, leading up here from the valley," he announced.

"That's right. It's another jeep trail that intersects this one. It leads over a low point of the ridge and drops into the basin to the north."

"Could we drive back down to town that way?"

"Forget it. That track's even worse than this one."

My uncle nodded. "Getting on toward suppertime," he said. "You have any plans?"

I didn't, and Len suggested we cook dinner where we were. In minutes a fire was crackling away in the fire pit, and before long a pan of pork and beans and a sooty coffee pot were steaming invitingly. I didn't need any extra invitation. It was my best meal since leaving Los Angeles.

When the dishes were washed we sat by the fire and smoked our pipes. Ribbons of smoke from their glowing bowls mingled with the pine scent plume from the campfire and rose straight into the still air. The sun sank

behind a western ridge, and we watched silently as the sky darkened. Venus appeared, followed by star after star, as the waning quarter moon sank from sight.

Len said we should always be attentive to the motions of our brothers, the sun and moon, for they affect life on our mother, the earth, in ways civilization hides from us. He pointed to the Pleiades constellation. According to a myth of our tribe these young stars were seven wise men who reversed evolution by turning themselves to pine trees, then rocks, and finally to stars, to escape their neighbor's insistent demands for medicines.

"Some people will do anything for a little solitude," Len observed.

"I wish I could believe that old story about the wise men," I said. "It might explain what happened to the man who made those bootprints." I hoped Len might offer some idea about those tracks. He was silent. I tried to prod him, subtly, into saying what he made of those disappearing footprints.

"What do you make of those disappearing footprints?"

"I made you a promise."

"You don't have to tell me everything you suspect. Just give me a hint or two. Or three."

"One: Do you think those tracks were made by someone who knows the outdoors? Two: Do you think Charley trusted Mr. X? Three: I think if you could follow those bootprints all the way, they'd lead you to a corpse."

I could see it now. Charley had distrusted the crooked collector so he told Mr. X to wait at the trail while he retrieved the gun. But Mr. X followed Charley from the side. He thought Charley had gotten the gun, and gave him a whack, but not a bad enough whack. Charley clobbered him and stumbled down the peak. Or a third party clouted Charley and Mr. X, then took the gun.

That explained why someone would slog up the bare slope rather than take an easier route down along the rocks. He wanted to watch from the side, where he could avoid being seen. Following from below he'd be easy to spot.

Or Len could be wrong about the bootprints leading to a dead man. Perhaps Charley spotted Mr. X shadowing from the side, faked the retrieval of the revolver, and got whacked for his pains. Our Mr. X could still be up there with food, water and a sleeping bag, searching for the

gun. He could be watching our every move.

Len declined the bed in my van and used my sleeping bag instead. The nights at eight thousand feet above sea level were mercifully cooler than those in the valley, and I slept soundly.

Next morning I woke and found the sleeping bag empty. I called. No answer came. I began to worry. What if Len had tangled with Mr. X during the night?

My fear subsided when I spotted a note on the truck's windshield. "Have gone up to continue search," it said. "Deeds of great worth are best done by the light of the rising sun, as the old Indians said. Feel free to go back down and chase your suspect. Please leave a day's food and water. Meet you tonight or tomorrow morning at Charley's house. Len"

That was a relief. It was Len's printing. If he'd been forced to write it, he would have left some clue. But each letter was formed characteristically, and that bit about the rising sun was something only an old Indian could have thought of.

After a hearty breakfast I drove back to town and phoned Charley's doctor. I asked if Charley could have stumbled down a thousand-foot slope after his head was cracked. The doctor said it would have been difficult, but people can do difficult feats when their survival's at stake.

Next I went to the real estate office. I'd seen aerial photos there, and I hoped for a color picture showing the Dos Cabèzas ridge. I wasn't disappointed. A minute search of the East Head showed only one area with red rock—the same place Len and I had searched. That seemed to rule out any chance that Charley had told the truth about the location of Geronimo's Colt.

Before I could escape the real estate office the agent collared me and asked if I'd heard the good news. An energy firm was going to build a pilot solar energy project in the valley. The plans had just been announced that morning in New York, and local land prices were going to skyrocket. There was word of a tourist attraction, too: a living recreation of a wild west mining town. Its employees would live and work like real frontiersmen. Tourist bric-a-brac and ice cream cones would be limited to the parking lot.

I convinced the agent I couldn't afford to buy land at the new prices, and fled. Later I wished my departure had been less abrupt, but at the moment I was eager to track Mr. X.

The motel owner, who was on duty when Mr. X was seen in town, was

now enjoying herself in Phoenix. I prevailed on the reluctant clerk to show me the registration cards for September 10 and 11. I copied down the information and thanked him.

At the car agency I learned that no cars had been rented or dropped off on the dates in question. No four-wheel-drive trucks had been rented. They didn't handle helicopters.

It was lunchtime by then, so I went over to the coffee shop. After only half an hour I got a seat, near the merrily ringing register. The proprietor was chatting amiably with everyone who paid for a meal. The solar project was the biggest news since Geronimo's capture. He was planning to knock down the back wall and expand. One townsman warned him that if the tourist village were built, a chain coffee shop would appear across the street. Another diner said he'd already heard a rumor to that effect, a rumor he'd discounted till today.

My luncheon was finally served. Their chili bowls weren't all that big, but when I thought of the chain-owned coffee shop to come, I decided they were sumptuous. I could see the place already, shining in plastic splendor across the street and blocking all view of the mountains.

I drove back to the reservation and bumped up the gravel road. The residents waved as I passed, and I waved back. As I drove by the trading post, one of the men stepped out toward the road. He wore khakis and a green cap, and seemed awfully familiar. It was Len.

He walked toward the tree against which his pack was propped while I parked the van in its shade. He reached into the pack without a word and pulled out a shiny Colt Peacemaker.

"The missing revolver," he said.

I sat on a rock and stared at the weapon. "How?" I said at last. "Where?"

"You release me from my promise?"

"Sure. Now how'd you find it?"

"I'll take it step by step. First there was Charley's wound. It was at the base of the occipital bone. If he'd been clouted by someone, he would have had to turn his back to his assailant and bend over for the blow to fall there. He wouldn't likely be so trusting with a crooked outsider who was after a valuable object.

"Second, there are his words. If he lied about how the gun was lost, why would he be so frank about not getting the money he was hoping for? I figured at the start that Charley was telling the truth, and that made it easy.

"Yesterday I asked John Fox about his father-in-law's assets. Charley owns some land near town. Taking that complimentary desk calendar as a cue, I phoned the real estate agent a little while ago. He said Charley's land was one of two sites a restaurant chain was looking at. The deal had to be kept quiet because the chain wanted to get its lot before a new development was announced and land prices went up. Charley said 'Now I won't get money' because the deal had a deadline and his injury took him out of the running. The chain bought a more expensive site in town.

"Third, there's the matter of timing. We knew Charley drove up to the ridge after the meeting on the twelfth, but we didn't know precisely when, since his family was away and no one saw him leave. But the curtains to his house were left open. That shows he left late in the day, at night, or early in the morning. He planned to return before the midday heat. No one saw Charley drive up there, but it wasn't because he sneaked up the back way. He left while they slept.

"When John found Charley, the truck contained only water and fixings for one meal. He didn't plan to stay on the ridge long. When we got there we found a new fire pit. No charcoal. That means he never got to fix the meal.

"Yesterday I checked the lights on Charley's truck. They work. Yesterday evening the moon set soon after the sun did, and it was in the last quarter. As the moon rises and sets almost an hour later each day, we know that on the thirteenth it rose about two A.M., and it was full. It gave Charley plenty of light to retrieve the gun. He didn't even need a flashlight.

"Fourth, there's the matter of direction. The sun had to be low enough in the sky to hit Charley's eyes, but high and strong enough to blind him for a split second.

"We know he didn't rob the grave in the afternoon, since his curtains were left open and no one saw him drive up there. Since he'd already retrieved the revolver and he was walking back toward the draw from the grave when he stumbled, we know he had to be walking east. He was walking back from the gravesite on West Head, not East Head, when the morning sun blinded him. All I had to do was look for a lightning-forked pine near red rock on the ridge leading up West Head from the saddle. It didn't take long.

"It's easy to fit the pieces together. Charley drove up there in the dark and parked in the draw as the moon rose. He gathered wood and built



a fire ring by moonlight, letting the moon rise high enough so it would be shining down into the saddle when he got up there.

"He went up to the grave, got the revolver, and prayed by the gathering light of dawn. He probably waited until the sun rose enough over East Head to strike him, then raised the revolver in gratitude to Grandfather East. As he stepped forward the sun and the glare from the revolver's well-preserved plating dazzled him. He didn't notice the rock he stepped on was unsound. It rolled beneath him, as that rock rolled under your weight yesterday when you *weren't* blinded. Unlike you, Charley was distracted by the precious weapon. Instead of checking his fall he focused his attention on the revolver, which flew from his hands when he stumbled. He was dazzled some, but the sun glaring off the revolver let him trace its path through the air.

"He probably didn't see it land. Instead he projected its trajectory through the landscape to where it would hit the ground, by the forked pine. Then he cracked his head on a rock. It only took a second.

"We don't know how long he lay there. It may have been two minutes or two days. Finally he drew up enough grit to stumble down to his truck. He was exhausted, and too far gone to drive. But he knew that getting back to the trail gave him a chance to be found and to tell where the revolver was."

"But if Charley was on West Head, whose tracks were those on East Head?"

"Charley's. I knew that as soon as we saw that one good print. I'd already inspected his boots yesterday at his house."

"Why would Charley tramp up that slope on the wrong peak?"

"Remember that the gravesite's a closely-guarded secret. That's the only reason anyone but a fool or a city fellow would slog up that loose slope instead of taking an easier route up rock. He left a false trail to throw off any white grave robbers who might follow him. One of the biggest problems for the Indian Police in this state is curiosity-seeking grave robbers. They take skulls and artifacts from sacred ground and use them as bookends. Charley was well aware of that repulsive little hobby. Word that the revolver would be retrieved had gotten out, so Charley was taking a reasonable precaution.

"No doubt Charley meant to leave a return trail down that same slope, but his injury prevented that. The corpse those footprints would lead to, if you could follow them all the way, is the corpse of the old chief. But

those tracks would take you on a very devious route.

"Yesterday when we went out there I asked you to park short of the draw. I didn't want your camper messing up any tracks. Still I managed to find prints from Charley's truck, Charley's boots, John's boots, his pony's hooves, and a lot of ours.

"I checked the trail east of the draw. There were no tracks of any kind. That confirmed several points: Charley didn't come back that way returning from East Head, he didn't drive to the draw by the back road, there wasn't a secret rendezvous with any Mr. X, and there wasn't any visit by a graverobber."

I stared at the revolver in some embarrassment. After the ordeal Charley had gone through, in the best of faith, I'd suspected him of selling out his tribesmen. How could I have been so suspicious? Then I remembered something:

"Quite a coincidence," I said. "Just when the reservation's trying to get a new clinic, Charley prices a new van like someone who's just come into money."

"No mere coincidence," Len replied. "Charley got interested in selling off his land when the drive to build the clinic formed. That's when he got the calendar from the real estate office. Later, when the restaurant chain got into the real estate market, Charley had a chance to complete the fund drive and donate a new ambulance, as well."

"Some suspect," I said, rising to take the revolver to a member of the tribal council.

"Oh, another thing, nephew. Since you've released me from my promise, there's one more fact you should know. I tried to tell you once before, but you stopped me.

"That isn't Geronimo's Colt."

I stared in stupefaction. It wasn't like Len to make such a joke.

"The gun belonged to Cochise, the other famous Indian hereabouts. Geronimo's grave is in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He died there as a government prisoner."

It was an easy mistake to make, for a finely-tuned mind like mine, mixing up Geronimo with Cochise, or east with west. I hoped none of the locals had noticed that little slip about the chief's name earlier.

Len and I left. On our way to Tucson we visited the Tombstone hospital. Charley was doing better, and complete recovery was expected.

A few weeks later the gun was auctioned in Tombstone. It fetched a

the price from the company that was building the Old West town, and the clinic was well and truly founded. A reporter phoned to ask how I'd managed to find the needle of a revolver in the haystack of a Dos Cabezas rest. I gave due credit to Uncle Len's powerful nose.



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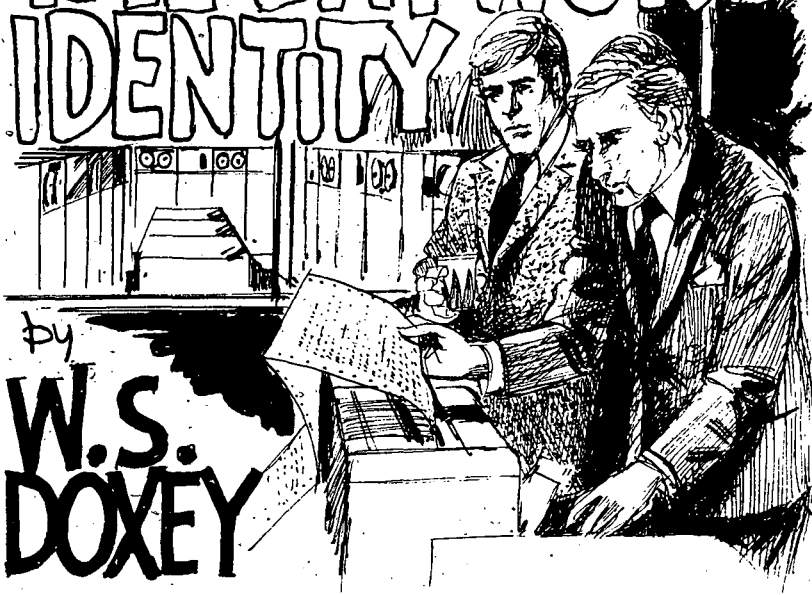
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*Why, Magritte wondered, would a gang of bank robbers go after so small a sum? It wasn't professional, unless, of course, they outranked even the pros. . . .*

# THE DAY-WORD IDENTITY

by  
**W.S.  
DOXEY**



Lieutenant Magritte drew a cup of coffee from the urn in the hall and went into his office. After hanging his tweed jacket on the hook beside last year's calendar, he sat in the swivel chair behind his desk and took a tentative sip, at the same time glancing at the sky through the wire downpanes that were strengthened with networks of wire mesh.

He asked himself what, exactly, he knew.

For one thing he knew the Domestic Bank on Orange Street had been

robbed of between six and eight thousand dollars in small bills.

Magritte checked his watch—11:07.

The armed robbery occurred at 10:16, forty-six minutes after opening time. According to the manager, a Mr. John Robinski, this was not a good hour for a heist because the big deposits came in near closing time in the early afternoon.

Still, six thou for a few minutes' work wasn't bad.

Magritte also knew that the robbers had apparently taken as hostage a Ms. Jane Carter. Apparently, because they did in fact abduct her at gunpoint, yet there seemed to be no need for a hostage. No attempt had been made by the guard—an elderly fellow named Vincent Letour—to stop the robbery.

Of course, Letour had no chance to intervene, had he chosen. One of the gunmen worked him over with a pistol. He also pushed the manager Robinski around. Both men were treated on the scene by paramedics and taken to Central Hospital for observation.

Magritte drank some more coffee. For only six thousand why had they wasted time pistol-whipping two people? And why the hostage?

Ms. Carter didn't work in the lobby. She was in the accounting section behind the tellers' cages. The facts weren't clear—never were in an armed robbery—but either she had come through the door from accounting for a reason known only to her or one of the bandits had gone into accounting and grabbed her.

Magritte's phone rang.

It was Lee Fleck, a hot-shot local TV newsman. They had played golf a few times, and when the red eye of the camera wasn't around, Fleck was okay. But now he was all business.

"What's new on the Domestic job?" he asked. "Any suspects? Arrests?"

"No comment."

Fleck laughed. "Didn't think you had anything. But hey, what's the angle to this rip?"

"Money," Magritte replied. "What other is there?"

"Yeah, but only seventy-one hundred and change? Split three ways that's nothing."

Seventy-one hundred? An accurate counting had been made. It was nice of the bank to tell the media before the police. But it was difficult to stop hot-shot Fleck from getting what he wanted.

"Hey, you still alive?" asked Fleck.

"Why, you got my obituary ready to air?"

"That's reserved for the famous and the infamous, not for cops who can't crack a simple case like this."

"When I know, you'll know," said Magritte. He hung up and got back to his coffee and his thoughts.

Fleck was right—seventy-one hundred was a paltry sum for three men to risk their lives for, though plenty of dumbbells had gotten iced for a lot less. Was that why they beat the guard and manager? He checked his notebook for what the witnesses thought they saw. Contradictions made it impossible to tell if they'd gone for the money before working over the two. But no one said the holdup men seemed angry or disappointed.

The phone rang again. It was Inspector Biro with a report on the hostage, Jane Carter. Magritte noted down her description and background. Yes, she was in accounting. Had been with Domestic for nine years. Before that, with a data processing outfit. Reason for leaving that position was to take a better one with the bank. Made thirty-two per annum, plus fringe benefits. No police record. Neighbors spoke highly of her.

Magritte thanked the inspector. Then he dialed the criminal ID section. Two tellers had been taken there to look through mug books. There wasn't much to go on—they'd been nervous, and who wouldn't be staring into the bores of big guns? The bandits wore dark glasses and caps with the brims pulled down. Even the security camera photos revealed nothing definite enough for a positive make.

The officer in command at ID told him as much. Magritte said thanks and asked him to have the tellers driven home.

He swiveled around and studied the sky through the window. The net-like filaments of wire divided it into neat sectors which might be individually examined at leisure were it not for the movement of clouds. Nothing was fixed, certain. Change was the only constant.

"Which means what?" he asked himself.

Of all the bank jobs he'd investigated over the past six years, how was this one similar? How was it different?

In the first place, people risked their freedom and their lives to get "free" bucks quick. They didn't lay it all on the line just to beat up a couple of guys. Could do that on the street, in an alley, anywhere.

In this case there were three armed men—which meant there must've been a fourth outside in a getaway car, and maybe a fifth on lookout at

the door. Three men inside—all right, the usual method was for one to cover the customers, one to cover the tellers and bank officials, and one to go behind the counter and get the cash. Usually they jumped the counter, then scrambled back over with the loot and made for the door. Money out first was the rule. Next came the guy watching the tellers. Last one out was the lobby man.

No witness said the bag man vaulted the counter. They all agreed that the guy stayed on the lobby side and told the tellers to empty their cash drawers in a bag resembling a pillowcase.

Magritte shook his head. A pro would never trust a teller. But pros seldom took time out to pistol-whip bank employees, either.

So they weren't pros?

Magritte laughed to himself. There was no law against amateurs taking on a bank.

But if these guys were greenhorns then what about the hostage? Damn, maybe one of them was a whacko who got his kicks exerting power over defenseless women?

Maybe. But Jane Carter was in her late forties, and while she wasn't unattractive she was no show-stopper.

What if they grabbed her after discovering there was only a few thousand with the idea of dealing her for more?

Another maybe. It wasn't possible to establish the sequence of events. The two tellers that remembered seeing Carter didn't notice her until the gunman was hustling her out the door. Her three co-workers in accounting were setting up the computer for the day's business, so they didn't notice she was missing till after they learned of the robbery.

Thinking of computers reminded Magritte of the request he'd made to the data processing unit. He dialed their extension and asked for an MO check. They would compare the events of this bank job with those of thousands of other robberies. Pros tended to stick with plans that worked; often it was their undoing.

The OIC was Lieutenant Mike Charles. He said, "Sorry, Magritte, but we've got problems. Get it run as soon as I can."

"Computer broken down again?"

"Nothing that simple. I can't gain access."

"Do what?"

Charles said, "Get into the network. Look, if you guys who deal with blood and guts would read the memos we geniuses circulate, you'd know

what's what in the real world. We have security procedures to protect our data. Before I can run your MO request, I must gain access to the FBI net, so their info can be examined. To get in there I have to use the right day-word."

"What's a 'day-word'?"

"Code word. Every day there's a different one. You have to flash it when the other computer says to, or you won't even get a bye-bye when they cut you off."

"Interesting," said Magritte. "But why do you need security? I mean, what have you got that somebody might want?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Asking."

"I thought you guys knew everything. Okay—what we've got is information. Suppose some dishonest but plenty smart citizen gets into our system. Then he can find out what we know about his operation. By 'we' I mean all the law enforcement agencies tied into the net. If this dishonest citizen wanted, he could alter or remove that information. Or he could get data about other citizens and use it for blackmail. Understand?"

Magritte had a hunch he was on the verge of a great understanding. He parked in the yellow zone in front of the Domestic Bank and went in through the same glass doors the robbers had left through—he checked the clock in the lobby, 11:47—ninety-one minutes earlier. An hour and thirty-one minutes. Plenty of time to get them clear of the city if they fled. And plenty of time for other things.

"But the robbery took place here in the lobby, not in accounting!" the manager Robinski said.

"Let's have a look anyhow," said Magritte.

Robinski frowned. "Jane Carter—you know something? Have you heard . . . she's dead?"

A customer looked in their direction.

Magritte lowered his voice. "There's no word about Ms. Carter, so we suppose she's safe. Why don't you show me accounting?"

As Robinski led the way he said, "You really believe she's all right? They wanted me to stay in the hospital overnight for observation. But someone has to be here. And besides, one robbery a day is enough. I mean, what else could they do to us? Ha!"

To all of this Magritte, who'd been hit on the head a few times in his



career, nodded and gave a reassuring smile.

Robinski introduced Magritte to Tad Simmons, the director of accounting, then returned to his desk in the lobby. The accounting section was located in one large room. At the far end were three small offices behind glass partitions. The floor space was taken up by computers and data banks which Simmons pointed out to Magritte as he gave him a quick tour. The machines hummed softly. Magritte was reminded of elderly people taking their ease in a park, reminiscing.

They went into one of the offices. Simmons poured Magritte a cup of coffee. Magritte thanked him, took a swallow, and said, "This is a large operation."

Simmons smiled. "Yes, but we handle accounting for six branch banks, too."

"You mean the equipment in this room is enough for that?"

"And then some. Matter of fact we're a clearing house for many other banks as well. You'd be surprised how much paper we handle in a day."

"Paper but no paper, right?"

"Correct. It's all electronic input and output, excepting the items from out front, of course. We punch those ourselves."

"What sort of security do you have?"

"As much as we need," said Simmons. "There's no rear exit. We enter through the bank lobby."

"That's not the type of security I had in mind. What about the computer? What's to stop someone with know-how from gaining access to your system and manipulating data?"

Simmons set his coffee cup on the desk. "Wait a minute. You're not suggesting that Jane Carter—"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm investigating a robbery that does or doesn't make sense, depending on how you look at it. As for Ms. Carter, you're one step ahead of me."

"I'm concerned for her. We've worked together for quite a few years."

"I'll buy that," said Magritte. "But what about your security? You use day-words?"

Simmons nodded. "That's standard procedure."

"So there's a code word operative for today?"

"Yes."

"Who chose it?"

"Why, I did—it's one of my responsibilities."

"And who knew it?"

"Everyone in this office. They have to know it."

"They absolutely must?"

Simmons hesitated. "Theoretically they don't. I'll try to explain. We come on line—open for business—at 0900 EST. At 0855 I flash the day-word to all banks tied into our network and they flash me theirs. Then—"

"You mean you aren't hooked by computer to every bank in the world?"

"Of course not. Too complicated, though given the state of the art it probably could be done. And it's not necessary, because the banks we deal with are very large institutions in major cities. They handle transactions for us just as we do for them."

Magritte nodded. "And?"

"I flash the day-word at 0855 EST. Okay. A bank in the net wants to do business. To gain access to us it must go through a certain procedure. First it identifies itself by its code number. Then our computer asks for the day-word. If that bank doesn't have it, or gives an incorrect one, our computer shuts it off."

"And off is out?"

"Yes. Without the current day-word no one gets in, not even the Bank of England. It's that simple."

Magritte grinned. "Yeah, simple, neat, and very clean. But how do you check up? Suppose I got in and asked you to transfer a hundred thousand from one account to another?"

"If you had the day-word and the accounts were listed in our system, we'd do it because that's our job. Actually, we routinely transfer amounts much larger than that. You'd be amazed how much so-called 'cash money' stays in the computer and never comes out. It's simply shuffled round and round."

Magritte checked his watch. The tour and chat had taken twenty minutes. One hundred eleven minutes had elapsed since the holdup—almost two hours.

"How long do these transactions take?" he asked.

Simmons shrugged. "Once the data's in, the operation is at the speed of light—186,000 miles per second. Call it instantaneous."

"Even from, say, California?"

"From anywhere—click, that quick, only quicker."

"Have any requests for the transfer of large sums been made in the

last hour or hour and a half?"

"How large?"

Magritte considered. Might as well go first class. "A million and up."

"I'll ask Ms. Edwards to find out. Have a refill on the coffee. It's a special blend I worked out on the computer."

Computerized coffee? It was better than the toothstainer at the station house. Magritte sipped and watched the procedure through the window of the office. Ms. Edwards, a petite black woman, sat at a console and, as Simmons spoke, typed on the keyboard. Moments later a sheet of paper issued from the top of the machine. Simmons tore it off and returned to the office.

He spread it on the desk and, pointing at a column of figures, said, "There've been a few."

A few? Magritte blinked. There were seventy-four transactions involving more than a million.

Simmons said, "I suppose you're thinking that in order to save her life Jane Carter gave them the day-word."

"And if she did?"

Simmons shook his head. "It wouldn't be worth anything to ordinary bank robbers. They'd have to know about systems; they'd have to have a terminal."

Magritte looked at the printout. Each entry was prefixed by similar abbreviated words which he didn't understand. Simmons explained. "What we have here is a second-level operation. That means we—Domestic Accounting—are concerned not with individuals as such, that is, small accounts, but rather with other banks, larger systems, holding companies, investment houses, and so forth."

"Let me get this straight," said Magritte. "Bank A asks you to transfer x dollars from one of its customers' accounts to the account of a customer doing business with Bank B."

"Correct."

Magritte frowned. "But it wouldn't be difficult to say you were Bank A even if you weren't."

"Not if you knew the code numbers used by banks. But they're strictly confidential."

"Which means they can be had."

Simmons nodded. "I'm afraid so."

Magritte checked the time. Another fifteen minutes gone. He decided to play a long shot.

"Mr. Simmons," he said, "I suspect the real purpose of this morning's armed robbery wasn't to steal a few thousand dollars out front but rather to get the day-word."

"You're accusing Jane Carter of being an accomplice?"

"I didn't say that. Let's assume the perpetrators knew—never mind how—that everyone in accounting knew the code word. All they'd have to do is stage a holdup and grab someone from back here. To make it look like they are only after the cash, they pistol-whip a couple of people. Once they get the hostage, they figure it's just a matter of time before they get the day-word out of her, and then they make a few fat transactions of their own."

"You think Jane would tell them?"

"Sure, wouldn't you? Or would you rather have your fingernails pulled out or your hand shoved down a garbage disposal?"

"This isn't real," said Simmons. "Things like that don't happen!"

"Come down to the station after this case is closed and I'll show you photos," said Magritte. "For now, let's assume my suspicion is right. Can you change the day-word?"

"Change it?"

"Can you? Is there a way?"

"Yes, of course. There's a contingency plan and an override protocol. But I don't have the authority!"

"I'm responsible."

"You can't be. This is a bank matter."

"And a bank robbery, which is also a federal offense. I'll call the FBI."

Another precious thirty minutes passed before Agents Logan and Mathews were able to get a top-level order for the override. During that time Magritte and Simmons and the agents put their heads together to consider which courses of action were open.

"The problem is we don't know if they've already made their move," said Magritte. "Once the override goes, they're blocked, but maybe they were finished anyhow."

Agent Mathews said, "Why not have the computer cancel all transactions and start over with a new day-word?"

"Impossible!" said Simmons. "That action would destroy the trust our

customers have in Domestic. Without trust we can't operate."

Magritte said, "But Domestic is ultimately responsible if errors are made?"

Simmons nodded. "It'll be up to the courts to decide if fraud is an error, though."

"Look," said Magritte, "let's go with what we've got and with what we know we can do. We'll change the day-word, but since the thieves aren't linked with your telex they won't know of the change. Now, we slip an additional order into the system so that when the old day-word is used—By the way, what is it?"

Simmons blinked. "Fish."

"Fish?" exclaimed Agent Logan.

"You don't like fish?"

"It's not that. You'd expect a code word to be, well, special and exotic, somehow."

"Every word is special, when it's kept secret," Simmons said.

"Sure. Don't take it personal."

"It is personal! This is *my* system—I'm responsible! One of my co-workers is missing. It's past lunchtime and I'm hungry."

Magritte said, "With luck we'll be able to eat in an hour. Can we make the computer tell us when someone tries to use the old day-word?"

"Sure," said Simmons.

"And identify the one using it?"

"The computer will tell us what it's told, if that's what you mean by identification."

Magritte drew a deep breath. "Finally, can we set up the computer so it will tell the user of the old day-word that his transaction has gone through?"

"You mean lie?"

"I didn't know a machine could lie. But if you want to call it that, okay."

Simmons cried, "I can't be responsible for that!"

Agent Logan put his hand on his arm and said, "Responsibility is like a skinny tree trunk. When the Indians attack it'll protect part of you but not all of you."

"Which means?"

"It's better to come out in the open and fight."

Simmons glanced at Magritte, who nodded and said, "What have you got to lose? If the plan works, you're a hero. And it'll serve as a warning

for other guys who figure they can outsmart the computer system."

Once the override was authorized, Simmons and Ms. Edwards required only seven minutes to build Magritte's suggestion into the system. When this was done there was nothing for the four men to do except monitor the console and wait.

Magritte said, "Tell me, Simmons, suppose they've already put their transaction through. What would be the safest way for them to operate?"

"Do you think I've been making plans of my own?"

"Sure, who doesn't? I'm a cop, but I still dream up bank jobs. It helps me to be a better sleuth."

"Sleuth?" laughed Logan. "I haven't heard that since the Charlie Chan reruns."

Magritte smiled. But to Simmons he said, "Come on, fantasize. Pretend you had the day-word, a terminal and the know-how. How would you get the money?"

Simmons looked at the faces watching him. He said, "Mind you, this is hypothetical."

"Of course."

"Okay, there are two main ways to go: inside the country or out. Our computer has links with the Federal Bank of Mexico City and the Central Bank of Geneva. Numbered accounts are easily obtainable at both. All I'd do is transfer the funds to an account at one bank or the other—or both."

"But how did you get the money in the first place?"

"By paying it into an account set up in advance. Could be a personal one. But I'd use a shell company, a fictitious corporation located in, say, Panama or the Cayman Islands."

"What does 'paying' into an account mean?"

"Just that: I'd authorize the computer to transfer x dollars from some large company to my shell account. Get y and z from other companies. When I had the sum I wanted I'd switch it overseas."

Magritte thought about this. Then, "And you could call in person the same day and withdraw the money in cash? The bank wouldn't require a day or two for verification?"

"What have I been telling you guys?" said Simmons. "Banking is done on trust! When Domestic tells Mexico City there's money, then there's money, period."

"And if there isn't?"

"Well, then Domestic and its insurers are stuck for it."

Magritte and the two FBI agents stayed at the computer console till after six when the janitorial crew began their chores and Simmons told them the system was closed down and there'd be no more transactions till morning.

"In a couple of hours the Tokyo Exchange comes on line, though," he said, "if you want to see how the yen stocks are doing."

Magritte had been going through the day's printouts; those finalized before the code word was changed. One for seven million five hundred thousand and change had gone to a numbered account in Geneva. Number 22-77-96-2.

What face or faces were behind those digits? Magritte found it impossible to compose in his mind's eye a set of features representing that much individual wealth.

Logan and Mathews were leaving. Logan said, "Well, it was a nice theory; but only a theory. Maybe next time."

"But what about Jane Carter?" asked Simmons.

The agents shook their heads.

"You mean—"

"We mean we don't know," said Logan. "Maybe we'll never know." To Magritte he said, "You leaving now?"

"In a little while."

"Come by the office in the morning, okay?"

Magritte nodded and the two agents moved through the door.

Simmons said, "There's no reason for them to hurt Jane, is there?"

"Reasons are usually what you want them to be," Magritte said.

Simmons turned away and paced back and forth across the room. Magritte studied the Geneva transaction. He was certain—maybe too certain—the robbery was a cover for something else.

But what did he have for proof? One lousy transaction which couldn't be traced because it disappeared behind a wall of numbers: 22-77-96-2.

"Can we go?" asked Simmons.

Magritte looked up at him. He was very nervous. Well, it had been a long day and a friend of his was missing. Magritte rose from the console and gathered up the bits and pieces of paper on which he'd been jotting notes. As he stuffed them into the pockets of his tweed jacket, his eyes

roved the keyboard. Looking down from above at this angle he noticed for the first time the way in which the keys were arranged. As on a typewriter, there were three rows of alphabetical symbols set in columns slanting to the right. At the top of each column was a number, so if you chose 2, you would find w, s, and x underneath it. And when you considered—

Of course, it was too obvious to mean anything of importance, but still—

Magritte sat at the console and, using the index finger of his right hand, slowly punched out 22-77-96-2.

Simmons had stopped his pacing and was behind him looking over his shoulder. Magritte said, "This won't foul the machine, will it?"

"No, but it's late. Can't you wait till tomorrow?"

"Only take a minute. Look, that's the number of the Geneva account in the transaction that went through before you changed the day-word."

"So? If the transaction was consummated, there's nothing to be done."

"That's not the point. Check how the keys are laid out. Look, the numbers are a code that spell out strings of letters—or words."

Magritte punched out WK-UU-LY-W.

Simmons laughed nervously. He reached over his shoulder and hit the keys, saying, "You can also come up with this."

SI-MM-ON-S appeared on the console.

"But so what?" he said. "If I were involved would I use such an obvious code for my own name?"

Magritte studied the man's eyes, how they shifted to the keyboard and back to his own. Simmons licked his lips. A vein on his right temple throbbed.

"Well, it is a coincidence!"

Magritte said, "It could be. But it also could be part of a clever plan."

"Plan?"

Magritte stood and faced Simmons. "Sure. Suppose a person like yourself decided to divert funds. With his expertise he could do it on his coffee break. But the problem would be covering himself if something fouled up. So he uses a very simple and, as you say, obvious code. Should something go wrong, he could claim no one smart enough to figure such a plan would be so foolish."

"So I'm exonerated, great. Let's go."

Magritte smiled. "Wait a minute. That explanation is good only if you



omit two pieces of evidence."

Simmons frowned.

"The robbery and the disappearance of Jane Carter. If the Geneva account and the holdup are connected, we have to ask why if only the computer person were involved; it was necessary to stage a holdup and abduct an employee. To provide cover for the inside person? Maybe, but stickups require street courage most straight citizens don't have."

"So it was an outside job," said Simmons. "And the code number's matching my name is a coincidence."

"Unless there's something else, something bigger than the computer person could handle."

Simmons' jaw sagged. "What's that mean?"

Magritte said, "Computers are useful for jobs requiring the processing of a lot of information quickly, right?"

"Yes, so?"

"So—what jobs? You're the expert; brainstorm."

Simmons scratched his head. "I suppose stock market forecasts could be made."

"You suppose?"

"They *are* made. And there are commodity and foreign currency deals."

Magritte eyed him. "The computer's perfect for those jobs because it makes predictions based on more information than a person can deal with before it's no good."

"Yes."

"You might say it figures the odds?"

"Well, yes."

"So isn't it possible to invent a gambling system, for horse racing, say?"

Simmons glanced away from the lieutenant.

Magritte said, "Suppose a guy thought he had such a system and tried it out with real gamblers, the big boys with big bucks—the mob—and suppose the system worked perfectly, only there was a variable; something he hadn't foreseen, and he was wiped out. Or maybe the mob found out and rigged the game against him and got him in debt like they do to steer suckers to the loan sharks. And suppose they offered a deal to settle accounts?"

Simmons said uncertainly, "That's a lot of supposes. Are you asking me or telling me?"

"It doesn't matter, really. With what I've got I can make it pretty hard

for anyone to go near that money in Geneva, unless it's clean."

"It's just a theory, like the FBI agent said."

"Maybe. We'll see when I inform the media."

The color drained from Simmons' face. "You mean name names?"

Magritte shook his head. "I'd never do that. Giving the bank's name would be enough for those involved to figure the rest."

Simmons said, "You're a policeman! You're supposed to protect people, not sign their death warrants!"

"Protection is as close as the nearest cop; citizens have only to pick up the phone and ask for it."

Simmons frowned. "I'm not admitting anything—but—suppose I had information and was willing . . ." He licked his lips.

"To blow the whistle? It's not my job to make deals. But the DA is always interested in nailing the big guys."

Simmons dropped into the chair at the console. "Those guys are tough, really tough!"

"All the more reason to shake loose, if you still can."

Simmons looked up at Magritte. "It was like you guessed. I had a system—a damn good one—for playing the horses." He placed his hand gently on the console. "I know, every sucker has a system—and they all fail. But mine didn't, because by using this baby I could figure all the significant variables: bloodline, past performance, track conditions, jockey, weight—everything!"

"That's been done before."

Simmons shook his head. "Not the way I did it, and not with a computer as sophisticated as this. Know what, lieutenant? I'm really much too good for this bank job. I took it so I could use the computer for my purposes."

"You're a time thief, too?"

"Call it what you want. Actually, I used the wasted micro-seconds between bank transactions."

"But if you're so smart, what went wrong?"

"Simple. I couldn't be here and at the track, too. So I had to bet with bookies. When I kept winning they figured maybe a fix against them. So they fixed a few themselves, enough to run me in the red." He gritted his teeth. "I never considered the human factor. I thought my program was in error!"

Magritte said, "Bookies and the mob are bad news. Why didn't you go to the track on your day off?"

"Once a week—are you kidding? The action's the thing, and the more the better!"

Magritte had known more than one compulsive personality so he didn't doubt Simmons' reason. "How much were they into you for?"

"Twenty-five thousand."

"For that you diverted over seven million? What was your cut?"

Simmons wiped his brow with his fingers. "You won't believe me."

"Try me."

"One percent, less my marker, plus my health."

Magritte shrugged. "Easy come, easy go, when it's not your money."

"One more thing—why the name was used for the numbered account. It wasn't my idea; it was theirs. They could hold it over me in case I got second thoughts. Only now that I have, it's too late to recover the money."

"Why?"

"They have a contact in Geneva who opened the account, so he's me. Thirty minutes after the transaction, he shifted the sum to another account, which I don't know."

Magritte took Simmons' arm and helped him stand. "Your worry isn't the money now," he said. "And it isn't the mob."

"Then what?"

"Jane Carter—unless she was in the plan."

Simmons sniffed. "She wasn't. She didn't know a thing, except the day-word. She was cover, for me and them. I sent her to the lobby as part of the plan. They won't hurt her . . . will they?"

Magritte steered him toward the door. "You know them. What do you think?"

"They promised they wouldn't kill her!"

In the bank lobby Magritte cuffed him. They used Simmons' key to let themselves out. There was a note on Magritte's windshield from Fleck, the TV newsman. It said: "Public servants are sworn to uphold the law, not break it by parking in restricted zones. Tune in the eleven o'clock news for at least fifteen seconds' footage in living color of your car and a few philosophical words by you-know-who."

Magritte crumpled the note and tossed it in the gutter. Another violation.

He got in the front seat, then glanced at Simmons and changed his mind. He stepped out and picked up the wad of paper and stuffed it in

his pocket.

Contempt for one law was contempt for all laws. A philosopher said that a long, long time ago, but which one? Magritte couldn't remember.

As they drove to the station, he asked Simmons. The computer genius didn't know either.



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*Jan's caller was hard to figure. He kept changing his story, but just enough to keep her guessing, and hoping.*

# THE LOBSENZ INTRUSION

by  
FRANCIS  
M.  
NEVINS, JR.



The first line is always the hardest. Nothing on earth, not even the infinite cold whiteness of the vast Antarctic, is as empty and as bone-chilling as the first sheet of paper in an author's typewriter. She had been staring at that numbing field of white for what seemed hours. When the doorbell pealed, it scared her to death. She unlocked the studio apartment door, opened it the width of the three chain locks. "Yes?" In this neighborhood of muggings and rapes and senseless murders, no one let in a stranger.

Not for any reason.

"Ms. Janice Nazarro?" The man's voice was deep and soft. The quarter of his face she could see told her nothing. He reached into his breast pocket and poked a crisp white business card through the door crack. Jan took it from his fingers and read: "P. Hunt Lobsenz. Attorney and Counselor at Law." The card gave a Los Angeles address and phone number.

Jan didn't think an ordinary street criminal would bother to have expensive fake cards printed. It wouldn't hurt to acknowledge who she was. "I'm Janice Nazarro," she said.

"Ahhh." The man's sigh was so quiet she hardly heard the release of breath. "End of search." Through the opening she saw him smile. "Ms. Nazarro, my firm represents the estate of the late movie producer Stanley Jackson. It's very likely that you are entitled to a share of that estate." He paused, coughed delicately. "May I please come in? It's really quite awkward to carry on a serious discussion this way."

All life is risk. Jan unfastened the chain locks and threw the door open. He was about five six, slender and natty, his hair gray, his vested pin-striped suit faultlessly tailored. This man was no mugger or rapist, and even if he were, Jan was two inches taller, matched his weight, and knew karate. "Sit down," she said after relocking the door. "Ignore the mess, I'm too busy trying to make a living to be a great housekeeper. Coffee?"

"Black, please." His eyes roamed the high-ceilinged apartment, took in the daybed and secondhand-store armchairs, the faded area rugs, the pressboard shelves crammed with paperbacks and writers' magazines, the Olympia Standard on the rickety oak desk against a wall, the row of blockbuster thrillers by Forsyth, Follett, Ludlum, and Cook on the ring-scarred cocktail table. He took the coffee mug she offered and sat primly on the daybed's edge after Jan seated herself in the high-backed armchair facing him. "You're a professional writer, I understand? Greeting card verses, true confession stories, paperback historical romances under house names, a few short mysteries?"

"You're well informed," Jan told him. "My latest is *Love's Pagan Fury*, just out last month. Have you read it?"

"I have so little time to read," he apologized. "As I said, my firm is handling the estate of Stanley Jackson, who died six weeks ago. One of the last great Hollywood moguls."

"He made sexist pictures," Jan said. "Now what gives me a share of his estate? I never met the man in my life."

"Mr. Jackson, ah, had the habit of marrying often and not always wisely. Whenever a marriage broke up he had to revoke his will and execute another. His heart attack, ah, caught him between wills and wives so that he died both unmarried and intestate. Which means that everything he owned, about six million dollars after taxes despite the inroads of his various wives, descends to Mr. Jackson's children."

"Lucky children," Jan said tonelessly.

"Indeed," Lobsenz replied. "And lucky you too. Because, ah, you're one of them."

It was as if she'd been kicked in the face. She felt the blood pounding through her head, wanted to run into the bathroom and be sick. *Control!* she screamed to herself. *Show nothing!*

"I'm sorry," the natty man said. "I assumed you'd be elated by the news. I take it you had no idea who your parents were?"

"I knew I was an orphan. I was raised in foster homes." *My God*, she was saying to herself. *What kind of wild story is this? Stanley Jackson my father? "Who was my mother?"* she asked him.

"A struggling actress named Ellen North, perhaps best known for playing in cowboy pictures with Buster Crabbe in the 1940's." He sipped coffee delicately from the stoneware mug. "In those days even the rumor of an illegitimate child could ruin a woman in Hollywood. Your mother refused to abort you so Mr. Jackson paid the maternity expenses and helped find you a foster home. Your mother died in an auto accident in 1950, three years after you were born. Of course Mr. Jackson never acknowledged you as his daughter."

"That," she said, "is the part of the story that puzzles me. You see, Mr. Lobsenz, I happen to know a little law." Her boyfriend, who was a wonder in bed but would be lousy as the husband of a garden variety writer, practiced with a midtown firm. "Isn't it a general rule that an illegitimate child has no right to inherit from its father unless the father formally acknowledges the child as his?"

"Not in California. The legislature passed the Uniform Parentage Act in 1975. Of course, a claimant has to prove he or she is the intestate's child. But you can do that." He paused again, seemed to be counting, four, five. "With my help."

It was then that she began to understand the story, and she bent forward with new intensity in her eyes. "Go on," she said.

"The evidence you need—the adoption paperwork, carbons of Mr.

Jackson's letters to your mother, and so on—is in my possession. Right now no one knows about it but me. In return for my flying halfway across the country and sharing this information with you, I expect you to share your piece of the Jackson estate with me. To be precise, I want one-fourth of your one-fifth. If you refuse, I fly back to L.A., destroy the evidence and deny we ever met.”

There was a warning signal blaring in her head, a voice shrieking at her that again something was wrong with the story. She stood, started pacing the scratched hardwood floor. “No,” she said. “It won’t wash. I could agree, we could bring our suit under that Parentage Act, and when the time came for the estate to be paid to me I could demand my full share and sue you if you didn’t turn it over. You certainly couldn’t raise this illegal agreement between us as a defense! And as a lawyer—if you are a lawyer—you must know you couldn’t. So how can you trust me to let you keep \$300,000 from the estate when I can take it from you so easily?”

“Oh my.” Lobsenz’ eyes seemed to slide shut as if in grief. “You are a bright lady indeed, Ms. Nazarro. If your mystery stories are as clever as their author . . . All right. But you did believe me? That you were Jackson’s daughter and all that? You did?”

“Maybe for a minute or two,” she admitted.

“Then we can make others believe it. You’re right, I’m not a lawyer but rather a sort of, er, professional opportunist. What I told you about Jackson’s intestacy and the Uniform Parentage Act is true. Anyone who can prove by a simple preponderance of evidence that he or she is the man’s illegitimate child is entitled to an equal share with the four children of his various marriages. If we go partners I can create that evidence.” He paused, coughed again. “I am the finest document forger in California,” he said. “Will you come in with me?”

And this time she believed the story completely. It was the simplicity with which he spoke, and of course the fact that no one would say something so incriminating if it weren’t true. Was this the answer then? Was this her way out, the end of hacking a bare living as a writer, trapped by lack of money in a desperate and unsafe neighborhood, fighting editorial tastes and taboos and shrinking markets and the word rates that stayed permanently behind inflation? Could she and this dapper stranger pull it off? “Yes,” she said quietly, hiding exultation deep inside her. “You have a deal.”



"You agree to be my partner in a venture to claim a share of the Jackson estate?"

"I said I did, didn't you hear me?"

"Ahhh." That strange almost inaudible sigh again that made her want to shudder. He reached into his hip pocket for a black leather case, opened it to display a blue and gold shield. "UNITED STATES OF AMERICA," the identification read. "FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION."

"My name really is Lobsenz," he said, "but the rest was, er, fiction. You see, Ms. Nazarro, the Bureau is, er, test-marketing a new anti-crime strategy, along the lines of Abscam but different. We researched your background and I was assigned to talk you into joining me in a wholly imaginary fraud. If we really had been after you, I would have made you write enough letters and make enough long distance calls to support Federal mail and wire fraud charges. . . . No, you're not Stanley Jackson's daughter," he smiled grimly, "and you're not under arrest either, of course. The Bureau doesn't use these ploys to entrap innocent people, just to get the bad guys."

"Heil the Bureau," Jan said fiercely. "All right, Mr. Lobsenz, you've had your jollies, you've put me through several wringers and gotten your test results. Now suppose I pick up that phone and call Frank Madden, the investigative reporter on the *Courier*, and tell him about your little visit? There goes your plan, right?" She gave the grim smile back to him. "And once again, with any brains at all you must have known I could do that once I knew you were FBI. So why tell me? Why didn't you just walk out with your mouth shut? That plot won't wash either!" She reached into the drawer of the table beside her chair, pulled out the Colt Python she kept for protection. "In fact, Mr. Proteus Lobsenz, not a damn thing you've said or done since you came in here has made a lick of sense! I have had just about enough of you."

Lobsenz leaped off the daybed with his hands flying into the air. "Civil Liberties Union!" he screamed. "I'm campaigning to warn the public about FBI intru—" He gave a thin, startled grunt at the small explosion and flung his hand over his heart and toppled onto the area rug.

Which just might, she thought, be large enough to wrap him in when she disposed of him after dark. That is, if he'd had any substance to dispose of. What a weightless inconsistent mess! He'd fit perfectly in the trash can, alongside the club for ethnically mixed people where everyone

had names like Marcello Akbar Bjornstrand, and the chimp who could communicate on a computer and narrated the story of murder at a primate research center, and the aging womanizer who unwittingly went for a hair transplant to the husband of one of his girlfriends. The hell with him. The hell with them all.

She went back to the desk again and sat hunched over the Olympia. What she needed before anything else was a title, a good blockbuster title like the ones Ludlum used. An unusual enough title might give her the idea for the story itself. She lowered her chin until it rested on the typewriter's cool plastic cover and stared at the empty page and waited.

The first line is always the hardest. Nothing on earth, not even the infinite cold whiteness of the vast Antarctic, is as empty and as bone-chilling as the first sheet of paper in an author's typewriter.

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*Jerry's sister was there, the money was there, and Smith was willing to let bygones be bygones. But no one could find Jerry to tell him so.*

# THY BROTHER'S KEEPER

by PERCY  
SPURLARK  
PARKER



**B**ig Bull Benson liked what he saw across his desk. She was milk chocolate complexioned, thin but built. Her make-up was done with a practiced hand, highlighting her high cheekbones, her large dark eyes. How a crumb like Jerry Burke could have a sister like her really showed how fouled up Mother Nature could get at times.

Bull got her life story in the first half hour. She and Jerry had grown up on the South Side, a few blocks from where they were now. She, the

older sister, always getting her little brother out of one jam after another. She had wanted to become an actress and after high school had moved to California. Nothing ever came of the acting career, but after a few years she managed to open a small boutique. When her father died, she talked her mother into moving out there with her. The boutique began doing very well. And most of Jerry's phone calls and letters ended with a request for a loan.

She'd flown into town last night after an urgent phone call from Jerry. He was in trouble, gambling debts, and he needed ten thousand dollars fast. She'd heard the stories before, but never with the fear that was in Jerry's voice this time. She could have wired him the money but had brought it herself in hopes of getting him to come back with her once the debt was paid. But Jerry hadn't met her at the airport.

She had gone to his apartment but he wasn't there either. After she identified herself to the building's superintendent, he let her into the apartment to wait. She had spent the night there, uneventfully except when the superintendent had used his pass key again, barging in on her with a bottle of vodka and two glasses. She had refused his hospitality and he'd gotten nasty, bringing up the fact that Jerry was two months behind in his rent. It was only when she gave him the back rent that he'd gone away.

This morning she'd gone to the police but there was nothing they could do for her. It was much too soon for Jerry to be classified as legally missing. And without proof of a crime committed the police couldn't do a thing. Except suggest she pay a visit to Bull Benson.

Vern Wonler had been the cop she spoke to at the station. And when she was on her way it had been Vern who'd phoned to let Bull know he was having company.

"Cathy Burke, Jerry Burke's older sister." Vern had explained her reason for being in town, then added, "She doesn't know who he owed the money to, but I figured you could help her out there."

For Bull it should be easy. He'd made a good part of his livelihood as a gambler. He knew the people to call, those who would talk to him a hell of a lot faster than they would the cops. In that respect he'd helped Vern out a couple of times. But locating Jerry was another matter. He and Vern agreed that Jerry was probably hiding out someplace. Although ten grand was more than enough to be killed for, knowing Jerry he'd just screwed up again, missed Cathy's flight and was now lying low until he

got a line on her.

"You got a place to stay? I can put you up here." Bull owned one of the busiest hotels on the South Side, mainly because the rates were fair and the rooms clean.

"I've already got a reservation at the Rolfe Plaza."

"It was one of the older but more elegant places downtown. He nodded. "And the money?"

She started to open her purse and he stopped her. "When you get to the Plaza have them put it in the hotel safe."

She looked down at her purse, back to him, smiled. "I guess it is kind of dumb walking around with all this cash."

He shrugged, smiling back at her. "It's understandable. Jerry just ain't letting you think clear right now. Look, go on to your hotel, get some rest. I'll see if I can find that brother of yours."

She stood, her green dress gracefully molding her body. "Thank you." She paused. "You haven't mentioned anything about a fee."

"Come on, Cathy. I'm no private cop or nothing. I don't hire out. Besides, how can you charge a friend for doing her a favor?"

She really had a very lovely smile. The broader it got, the better it got. It plumped her cheeks, even added a little twinkle to her eyes.

"I'll call when I turn Jerry up," he promised.

He got on the phone after she left, catching up with Tipsey Turner on his third try.

"Jerry Burke?" Tipsey said, on the other end of the line. "That chump owes everybody in town. But he dropped a bundle last week to Frederico Smith."

"Ten big ones?"

"Yeah, I heard it was around that. Don't know why Smith let him run up a tab that high. Jerry still owes me fifty from three months ago."

"Me, too," Bull admitted. He hadn't told Cathy, but Jerry had owed him a hundred bucks for almost a year now. Some debts, though, he marked down as uncollectable, and used them as a damn good reason not to dish out any more.

"Have you seen him lately, Tipsey?"

"First of the week at Gore's trying to get into a game. But nobody wanted to be bothered with him."

"Well see if you can come up with anything. His sister's here looking

for him."

"A sister, huh? You mean his folks didn't give up after him?"

"It was the other way around. They did so well with her, I guess they figured they couldn't go wrong the next time."

"Man, were they fooled," Tipsey said, and hung up.

Bull pulled at the corner of his mustache. Frederico Smith. Damn. It would be Smith. He had ties with the mob, mainly at the enforcement end of the juice racket. He owned a half dozen hot dog palaces scattered through the black community on the South Side, and he was an addict for high stakes poker games.

Bull had shared a table with him a few times. Smith played a hard game. The man knew his cards and he liked winning. If Jerry owed Smith ten grand, there was plenty of reason for Cathy to have detected fear in Jerry's voice.

Bull had gotten his nickname as a kid from his size—he was six feet tall by the time he was fifteen—and from the way he played football. Whether they played in the street or in an alley or in some glass-filled lot, he was always the same. Charging hard at the opposing line, bulling his way through. The trait had stuck with him. He found it very difficult to skirt an issue. And attempts at being diplomatic took a toll on him. Thus, after speaking to Tipsey, his natural move was to go around to see Frederico Smith.

The stench of fried onions attacked his nostrils when he stepped into the place. If he'd been hungry he might have felt different, but he'd had a big breakfast, which reduced the joint to a bad odor.

"Hey, Bull. What's happening?"

Rodger Austin was behind the counter dishing out dogs and fries to the kids from the local high school.

"I'm not making too much noise these days, Rog. What about you?"

Austin shrugged his skinny shoulders. "A buck here, a buck there, you know."

"For real. Freddie in?"

"Yeah. Go on back, he'll be glad to see you."

Iron Dirton opened the door to his knock. Dirton hadn't been in the ring for five years, but he kept in shape by bouncing people off walls for Smith. His professional handle when he was in the grunt 'n' groan game had been Dirty Iron Man Dirton. In the years since, only the name had

been reduced. He was thick, from the top of his head to his size sixteen D's. He filled the doorway so no one could get by him, or even manage a peek into the office.

"Who's out there, Iron?"

"Bull Benson, boss," Iron spoke over his shoulder. "You got the time?"

"Hell yeah, let him in."

Smith was standing behind his desk, hand outstretched, smiling, when Bull came in. "Good to see you again, Bull," he said. "I was just telling Iron it's about time I got up a game with some folks who take their card playing seriously."

"Let me know. I'll be there."

"All-right," Smith said, nodding. He was a tailored man in a tailored three-piece. His afro was well-groomed and moderate, his goatee only a little more than a shadow on his chin. He wore a couple of diamond rings on each hand.

Iron poured drinks, hundred proof bourbon for Bull and brandy for Smith.

"Why the visit?" Smith asked.

"I heard Jerry Burke owes you."

"You got it. You know where I can find him?"

"I was thinking maybe you knew."

"I wish," Smith said. "I've got some brand new tricks I'd like to try out on him."

Bull took a swallow of his drink. "I heard he owes you ten grand, but I didn't think that was possible."

"It happened. I wanted to teach the punk a lesson for trying to play with the big boys. We were at Harv's last week. Jerry was doing okay at first, talking it up a lot. The game came down to just him and me. He was ten grand light on the raise I made, so I took his marker. He had four bullets. I had a queen high straight flush. Now, don't think I didn't warn him before I took the marker. I told him I'd be wanting my money soon. He was supposed to have had it to me yesterday."

"You haven't had any word from him?"

"Not a one."

"I hope he ain't skipped town," Iron said solemnly.

Smith grinned. "Iron's been making plans, too. You sure you don't know where Jerry is? I know your rep, Bull. You're a tough man at the card table, but you're a sucker for a sob story. Did he come crying to you

or something? What are you suppose to do, buy him some extra time? I want my money, Bull."

"You'll get it, Freddie." He didn't want Smith to think he was working against him. If he and Smith ever had a disagreement, it wasn't going to be over the likes of Jerry Burke.

"Where've you got him hid?" Iron wanted to know.

"I don't have him hid. But his sister is in town and she's got the money."

Smith's thin face brightened. He nodded, rubbing his goatee. "As much as I want to tap dance on that dude's head, I guess I want the money more.

"How soon can you get it to me?"

"As soon as I find Jerry. That's the only thing holding it up. His sister doesn't know where he is. I thought maybe you had an idea."

"Naw, I've been looking ever since he failed to show yesterday." Smith looked directly at him. "We can work this thing out ourselves, you know. Just get me the dough and we'll call it even."

"I don't think his sister would buy that. She'll want to see Jerry alive and in one piece."

Smith showed a lot of teeth. "Come on. I'm a business man. Sure, Jerry's got a lot of hurt coming to him, but if I get the dough that ends it. Why don't you let me talk to this sister?"

"I don't think so, Freddie. We'll locate Jerry first and then you'll get your money."

"You know there's never been any trouble between us, Bull."

"I don't expect any now."

"You ain't jiving me, are you? Jerry's sister is in fact here?"

"Be real. Would I lie for Jerry?"

"You got a point. Okay, we do it your way."

As Bull stood up, Kermit Marsh came into the office. If Iron was Freddie's right hand, Marsh was the left. He was as tall as Iron but not as beefy, had droopy hound dog eyes, and was bleeding from a small cut on the left side of his jaw.

"Sorry I'm late, boss. I just couldn't get my butt in gear this morning."

"A blood sacrifice wasn't necessary," Smith said.

"New razor blade." Marsh mopped at his jaw with his handkerchief.

"Hello, Bull. What's up?"

"Bull is gonna help me get my money from Jerry."

"And then we're going to sit down with a deck of cards, and I'm going



to take it all back."

Smith didn't know where Jerry was. It was the only thing Bull felt certain of as he climbed into his Caddy. He pulled the wrapper off a cigar, lit it. Whether Smith would consider the debt paid once he got his money was something else. There are people in the world who just invite a good beating. Jerry was that type of person.

Where from here? Jerry didn't have any steady girl that Bull knew about, or any close friends, actually. But he was hiding out somewhere, and somebody was helping him. He dropped by to see Tipsey Turner.

"Zero," Tipsey said, shrugging. "The dude's gone."

"It don't figure. He knew his sister was bringing him the money. He wouldn't leave town."

"So, where is he?"

"I'm asking you."

Tipsey was sitting on the side of the bed, in the one-room rental he called home. He wasn't big; he barely reached five feet. His hair was thick, combed to the back and streaked with gray. He hadn't held a regular job in twenty years. He made his living the same way he got his name. If anyone knew the score on the streets, Tipsey was supposed to.

Tipsey took a hefty swallow from the beer bottle he was holding, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Okay, there is something floating around, but man, it's so crazy I really don't think it's worth looking into."

"What is it?"

Tipsey took another hit off the beer. "He may be with Peaches Miller."

"What?"

"Look, it don't sound right to me either. I've seen her at the track a couple of times lately." Tipsey shook his head. "That gal's got more class than most of the big money in the suburbs."

Peaches had been on Bull's list of things to do for a good while, but he'd never really worked at it. To find out she and Jerry were a twosome was like hearing craps called a parlor game. It could be, but it wasn't supposed to happen that way.

"Where did you get that from?"

"One of the gals on the street. She swears it's gospel."

"Next you'll be telling me the Easter Bunny doesn't lay eggs."

"I only pass on what I hear."

If Peaches was hiding Jerry, it would be a good reason why he hadn't

een found. Who would look for him at her place? "You got a phone book?"

"In the closet."

Bull had to go through a ton of dirty clothes to get to the box and it was over two years old, but it served the purpose:

"Rolfe Plaza."

"Cathy Burke, please."

There was a moment or two of silence, then, "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't know a Cathy Burke listed."

"You sure? She couldn't have checked in more than an hour, hour and half ago."

Another moment ticked by. "No, I'm sorry. I've double checked but he's not listed. Do you have the correct hotel?"

The reservations desk confirmed he had the right hotel. Cathy had made a reservation but she'd never showed.

"Damn," he said, slamming the phone down.

Tipsey jumped. "What's the matter?"

"Somebody's always slipping in a marked deck."

Cathy hadn't made it to the hotel. Had she detoured on her own or had she had help? If she had help she could be almost anywhere. On her own, Jerry's apartment seemed the likely place to look.

His mind was doing a number on him as he drove. Twice he started to pay Smith another visit, or go to check Peaches out. If Cathy had gone to Jerry's and Jerry was there, then Jerry would have taken the money and run right over to Smith, sending Cathy over to Peaches to wait for him. Or Cathy might have insisted on going to Smith's with Jerry. Or they both could have gone to Peaches. Or maybe Jerry and Peaches didn't even know each other.

But he found her.

It was easy. The door to Jerry's apartment was ajar. He just gave it a little push and it opened. She was on the floor by an overturned coffee table, dark bruises about her neck, her eyes open but not seeing. He found her purse, next to a pale yellow overnight case with the initials J.B. on it, and he knew before he looked inside the ten grand was missing.

The building super was a boozier named Scott. Bull could smell the stale alcohol on him when he answered the door to Bull's knock.

"Yeah?" He was heavy-armed and pot-bellied and in need of a shave.

"I'm Bull Benson, a friend of Jerry Burke. I've got to make an urgent

phone call." He would have used the phone in Jerry's apartment but it wasn't working.

"This ain't no phone booth, mister."

"I said it was urgent," Bull repeated, and then he told him why.

Scott belched again, stumbled back, and said, "Murdered? Sure, sure. Come on in."

Bull caught Vern at the station..

"What? You were supposed to help her find her brother, not get her killed."

"That's not called for, Vern," he said, but in a way he did blame himself. He could have tried talking her into staying at his own hotel, or at least escorted her to the Rolfe Plaza. "We'll argue about it later. I've got some running around to do."

He dropped the receiver onto its cradle. Scott had produced a can of beer and was working on it in earnest, his head tilted back as he drank. Trying to talk to Scott now would take more time than Bull had to spend there.

Peaches answered the door herself, greeting him with a full-lipped smile. "Well, well. So, you finally arranged your schedule to come and see me."

She was wearing silk lounging pajamas, gold slippers, dainty hooped earrings. She took him by the hand, closing the door behind him. "Can I get you a drink?"

"This isn't a social call, Peaches."

"Now how can you say that? Any visit from you would have to be sociable."

"Where's Jerry, Peaches?"

"Now, Bull. You know my motto has always been one man at a time."

Amateur wasn't in her vocabulary. She was warm and soft against him and her perfume was all about him. There were a lot of things he could have forgotten about then.

He took hold of her shoulders and pushed her back. "Get him out here. He's got some funeral arrangements to make."

It took a couple of stiff shots of scotch before Jerry was able to talk. He sat on a stool at the end of a light blue padded bar. He was thin and not especially good looking; his narrow mustache trailed out to join the tips of his sideburns. Peaches stood beside him, an arm around his shoulders.

"You sure she's dead, Bull?"

"I'm sure, Jerry. And whoever did it has got the money."

Jerry seemed to shiver, took another swallow of his drink.

Bull had poured a bourbon for himself. He was standing by the window looking out at the other sleek buildings in the apartment complex. "How come you missed her at the airport?"

"Peaches went for me," Jerry sighed. "But I gave her the wrong flight number."

"It figures."

Jerry looked over to him quickly, then turned away.

"How come you didn't offer him the dough, Peaches?"

"I ain't got it, Bull. I make a good buck, but I spend it. And I like the ponies."

He remembered what Tipsey had said about seeing her at the track, and it didn't seem so strange to him any more that she and Jerry had gotten together. They might have deserved each other. Both a couple of losers; one just put up a better front.

"You know you're gonna have to go to the cops?"

Jerry shook his head. "I can't."

"You don't have a choice. She was murdered in your apartment. They'll be looking for you."

"So is Smith."

It was true. If Smith was responsible for Cathy's death, Jerry could be next on the list. And if Smith hadn't done it, then he was still looking for Jerry for his money.

"The cops are your only out."

"No, Bull, you can't force him to do that," Peaches said. She hung onto Jerry even tighter.

"Then what should he do, Peaches, stay here? If I can find him, Smith can, too."

That froze them for a second or two, each looking at the other.

"I can leave town," Jerry said.

Bull threw his glass at him. It was done too hastily for the throw to be accurate. The thick-bottomed glass crashed into the mirror behind the bar as both Jerry and Peaches ducked.

"You don't give a damn about your sister, do you?"

"That's not true," Jerry shouted.

Bull started for him and Peaches got between them. "Bull, please."

He let the anger seep slowly away. It wasn't Jerry he wanted to get his hands on but the creep who killed Cathy.

"Look," Peaches said, "can't we do this another way?"

"You got any ideas?"

She shrugged. "You're friends with the cops—"

"Some of them."

"Okay, some of them. But can't you go talk to them? Get them to pull Smith and his dudes in for questioning or something. Once the cops've got them out of the way, it'll be safe for Jerry to go down and make a statement." She went over to Jerry. He was standing by the bar now, his back to it. "What'd you say, babe?"

Jerry clasped her hand in his, took a breath. "It'll work."

"There, Bull," Peaches said. "How about it?"

They really weren't asking that much, just some effort to see that Jerry didn't wind up like his sister. "I'll see what I can do. Jerry, what's your super's phone number?"

It took less than five minutes for the super to get Vern to the phone. "Bull, where the hell are you?"

"I told you I had a run to make."

"And I told you to stay put. When are you ever going to listen? Friend or no friend, I'll turn the key on you myself."

"Look, I was supposed to find Jerry, okay, so I have."

"Bring him in."

"You'll get him, but you've got to haul Frederico Smith and his crowd in first." Bull ran the whole story down to him then, leaving out Jerry's whereabouts or any mention of Peaches. "I'd lay my money on Kermit Marsh," Bull said. "I was with Smith and Iron when Cathy was killed, but Marsh came in later and he had a fresh scratch on his jaw."

It rolled out of him as if he'd been pondering the idea for quite awhile, but it hadn't been on any conscious level. It had been tucked in a corner someplace, waiting for the chance to present itself, and once out, it sounded right. Cathy's being killed didn't make much sense, not even for the money. It could have been taken from her without doing her any harm. But Bull had never known Marsh to exercise his brain power to any great degree. If anyone committed an unnecessary murder, Marsh was a likely candidate.

"Okay," Vern said. "Marsh may be the one, but that doesn't explain about Jerry."

"How'd you mean?"

"The building's super saw him leaving by the back way, about a half hour before you made the phone call."

Bull didn't hear any more of the conversation, he hung up. Jerry was still at the bar. A right hand lead is generally considered a mistake, but it was Bull's best punch. He led with it. It connected. Jerry collapsed like he'd stepped into a manhole. Peaches screamed.

"Damn you, you knew she was dead all along. Your building's super saw you. I don't like being lied to."

Peaches tried grabbing Bull's arm. He brushed her aside, reaching down and pulling Jerry up by his collar. Jerry held his hands up in a feeble attempt to fend off further attack. "Don't hit me again, Bull, please. I've been too scared to think straight."

"You've never been straight with anybody, Jerry," Bull said, tightening his hold on the collar until Jerry began coughing. It took him a while before he let go, pushing Jerry back against the bar. "Talk, and get it right this time."

Jerry rubbed his throat, coughed again. "Since I blew last night, I've been driving myself crazy trying to figure how I was gonna catch up with Cathy. I called the hotel where she usually stays when she's in town, but she wasn't there. Peaches had to make a run this morning. I tried the hotel again, then I thought maybe she was at my place. I couldn't call there, the phone in my place has been cut off for two weeks. So, I took the chance of going over. Man, I was scared, Bull. I thought for sure I'd bump into Smith or one of his boys. My hand was shaking so bad I could hardly get my key in the lock. When I got the door opened I found her, and, well, I ran. I didn't even think about the money until I got here."

Bull stood looking at him, trying to pick out any extra flinch or twitch which might indicate a lie, but he could detect none. It threw it back to Marsh. It was a sure bet Smith hadn't ordered Cathy killed. But it was just as safe to assume Smith wouldn't turn down the ten grand Marsh had taken off her. Unless Marsh was playing it cagey and keeping the money for himself. There was going to be a hot time at the interrogation room at the Moore Street Precinct.

Bull sat at his desk toying with his steak sandwich. It was after six. He'd just toured his lounge. The place was filling up with the after-work crowd. He'd said hellos, smiled, shaken hands, but his mind wasn't on his hotel.

He'd gone to the kitchen, gotten the sandwich and come back to his office. It was a good cut of meat, cooked the way he liked it, but his appetite wasn't there.

He'd personally delivered Jerry to Vern at the police station. Vern said he would call as soon as he got things worked out, but that was over four hours ago.

Bull hadn't thought it would take that long. He pushed the sandwich aside, and the car keys he'd dropped on the desk, and got the Granddad out of the bottom drawer.

He hated waiting. Especially when there was nothing he could do about it. It was like being locked in a traffic jam on an expressway with no chance of getting to an exit ramp. Turn up the radio, lean back, and pretend it's all a big party. Easy advice to give, but it rarely did him any good. If he could just get his mind off Cathy. There was plenty of work to do around the hotel; if nothing else he could go help tend bar in the lounge, or go . . .

The phone.

He grabbed it before it finished its first ring.

"I had to cut Smith and his boys loose," Vern told him. "There wasn't enough to hold them on. Marsh didn't cut himself shaving. He and his girlfriend had a blowout at a restaurant this morning at breakfast. She clipped him with an ashtray. We've got half a dozen witnesses. That gives him an alibi for the time the murder was committed. And you're Smith's and Iron's alibi."

"Damn."

"Same here. It was looking good for a while, but there was nothing else I could do. We've still got Jerry. Holding him on an open warrant. It's not going to last forever, though. So, nothing's really changed."

"Tell that to Cathy," he said, and hung up.

He reached for the Granddad and his keys got in the way again. He picked them up, dropped them in his shirt pocket, took them back out. He almost laughed out loud. If he'd just paid better attention, the whole thing could have been wrapped up by now.

He reached for the phone to dial Vern.

He stood behind Vern as Vern knocked on the door. The superintendent of Jerry's building answered the door in his undershirt. His eyes were bloodshot.

"What d'ya want now?"

"A confession would do," Vern said, stepping into the apartment.

Scott frowned, belched, "You're crazy."

"No," Bull said. "You're crazy if you think you're going to get away with this murder."

There was a can of beer on the stand by the TV. Scott picked it up, started to say something, took a drink instead.

"Let me tell you how it went," Bull said. "Last night when Cathy came here looking for her brother, you let her into the apartment with your pass key. You used the key to get back in when you offered her the vodka. She came back this morning to get her overnight case. I know because I was with her earlier and she didn't have it then. You used your key again to let her in. I doubt if you started out to kill her, but it wound up that way. Copping the money was probably just an afterthought."

Scott shook his head. "You're dreaming."

"You saw Jerry this morning and that worked out fine for you," Bull continued. "You could place him at the scene of the murder for the cops and that would be that. But Jerry had to use his key to get into his apartment. When he saw the body he panicked and ran, leaving the door unlocked, the way I found it. For the door to be locked when Jerry got here meant the killer had to have a key. You're the only other person with a key to that apartment." Bull looked around the room. It was cluttered but small. "I don't think it'll take the cops too long to find the money you took from her."

Scott stared at the can of beer for a long while, finally throwing it to the floor and flopping down in a chair, his face in his hands.

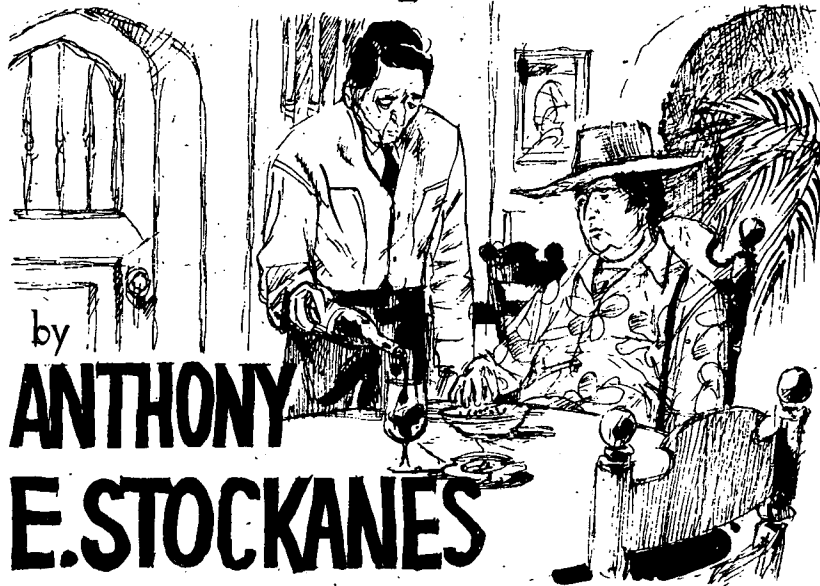
Vern looked over to Bull, nodded. Bull returned the nod and headed for the door. There was satisfaction in knowing Cathy's murderer wasn't going free. But he couldn't work up any anger against Scott. The crime was probably committed out of stupidity more than anything else, and pity was the only emotion that came into play.





*Leave nothing to chance, Paul Vincente had told him. . . .*

# THE APPRENTICE



by  
**ANTHONY  
E. STOCKANES**

It's much like a game, Paul Vincente always said, but a very serious game. The vital rule is preparation. Learn everything possible about your man. What does he eat? When does he eat? How does he sit when he eats? How does he walk? Startled, does he jump instinctively to the left or right? Remember, you can't always expect even a banker always to move to the right. Philippe always laughed when Paul Vincente said that, no matter how many times he heard it.

Only then, Paul Vincente always said, only when you thoroughly know your man can you intelligently plan to kill him.

Paul Vincente was an excellent teacher and Philippe was an excellent student.

Education, Philippe's father had droned, you must have an education. That is what makes a man successful, education. Well, that was one of the few wise things the old man said. Philippe had his education and now he was successful.

He snapped a sunflower seed between his teeth, deftly extracted the nut with his tongue, and spat the husk into the spreading pool of shells at his feet. He shifted his chair a few inches, moving out of the sun, and sipped the resinous wine. Across the wide street a squad of soldiers stamped smartly to the gate of the presidential palace and the sergeant in charge exchanged a brisk salute with a perspiring lieutenant.

Philippe yawned widely and stretched, sneaking a look at his watch. Exactly two o'clock. A loose column of young girls from the Catholic school, white blouses dazzling in the sun, giggled their way past the soldiers. Philippe scratched his thighs and yawned again, tilting the brim of his new wide planter's hat lower.

Unbidden, the old waiter splashed Philippe's glass full, slid another small chipped plate of salted seeds on the table, flicked a once-white napkin at the empty saucer, and stacked it with the others.

Philippe nodded his thanks and pretended to yawn again. It should be just about—ah, yes, here it was. The sleek black automobile with opaque, green-tinted windows nosed around the corner and purred through the gates. The windows were bulletproof. He knew that, just as he knew that a sandwich of tempered steel plates was welded to the car's frame to protect against a grenade rolled under it. The President was a cautious man. His predecessor had neglected the steel plates; that was how the bald old man in the palace across the street became President.

But Philippe also knew—it was his business to know such things—that the bulletproof windows weren't the best available. In fact, the President had ordered a new automobile armored to level 4. It would not arrive for another month, information which had cost Philippe an extraordinary amount.

A very cautious man, the President. That was why the car never appeared until the guard was changed. Guard members were carefully selected, then rigorously trained by the famous Colonel Borkmann until

they were no longer men but lithe, muscled mechanical things, their reactions instantaneous, automatic, and lethal. Even so, the President never entered the car and left the grounds unless the guard was fresh; he took no chances on boredom or fatigue dulling those finely honed reflexes.

Philippe patted his belly, the extra pounds a result of methodical gluttony over a month. He would rapidly lose them, changing his shape, leaving witnesses a memory of a round-shouldered, paunchy man. He was the picture of an idle tourist content to sit in the autumn heat sipping wine, chewing sunflower seeds, and thinking of the brown sweaty-flanked women on Conzantca Street or the grilled fish he would have for dinner.

Paul Vincente and the others (most of them dead), the long wet nights in the hills with the sound of one's own heartbeat so loud it seemed the echo ran through the valleys, the growl of the army's jeeps like so many metal dogs searching for them, the occasional laughter and the constant teeth of fear chewing at the gut. A long time ago.

Nothing left to chance, Paul Vincente had said again and again. Know your man, his habits, his routines. If that man is clever he will try to avoid routine, but he can't completely change himself and then change again. For a day perhaps, a week, the little details can be rearranged. But a man *is* his habits. Even the most carefully planned changes gradually form their own pattern.

The stout old man in the palace across the street was both clever and careful. He shuffled his schedule, slept one night in this room, the next in a room on another floor. He took precautions, never leaving the palace until a fresh guard was on duty. That was clever—but it had become a habit.

Philippe's eyes were half closed. He seemed to doze. Behind the slits of his eyelids he once more measured the distance from his table to the gate.

The President's car slowed, dipped through the shallow rut at the gate, and in that moment the front window was a sun-smeared rectangle. Then the car turned sharply to the right and was gone. Sometimes it turned right three times in a row; then for two days it would turn left and circle the square. Then, for a week, it would be left, right, left, right. A clever, careful man, the President. The groove cut across the gate was a good idea. An entering car had to slow and edge across it. But a car leaving had also to slow for the dip, exposing the window to anyone sitting at a

table across the street. Of course when it did that, nothing was visible inside because the sun flashed across it. A rifle would be useless.

Long ago Paul Vincente told the story of an ill-prepared plan, a plan based on theory only, a stupid scheme because the actual area had not been studied.

A good marksman was sent to shoot a certain minister. The "theorists" told the marksman exactly where he should stand and exactly when he should shoot. It all looked very good on paper. And the marksman followed orders exactly. But when he rested his rifle on the windowsill and aimed at the reviewing stand he was squinting directly into the setting sun. He panicked, flinched, pulled the trigger, and killed, not his target, but the colonel standing next to the minister, the poor ambitious colonel who had arranged and paid for the shooting. It was funny and illustrative. It was another of Paul Vincente's lessons that Philippe remembered.

Ah, he sometimes missed those days so long ago with Paul Vincente in the hills. Not that he would want to do all that again, clawing through rope-thick vines, pulling leeches off his legs, leeches so firmly attached he thought he'd pull his bones loose with them, lying for twenty hours in a scum-crusted ditch holding his breath and desperately afraid the smell of his own waste was too different from the rotting vegetation and would betray him to the searchers. It was much better now. He did not regret the education—it was that training which made him a successful independent businessman—but he would not wish to repeat it.

He lifted a finger for the waiter and smiled at the bill, exposing one glittering gold tooth and a broken incisor. It took twenty minutes each morning to disguise his own perfect teeth, but the waiter would clearly remember the wink of gold, the peculiar jagged shape of the broken tooth. Small things but so important. He fanned out a sheaf of small banknotes, stiff paper with the President's stern face on each bill, and pretended ignorance at the currency's value. He was amused when the waiter slowly calculated the bill and took precisely twice what was owed, then bowed solemnly at the tip. The waiter could not imagine that Philippe had been born a short walk from this very table, had spent the first years of his life running barefooted and hungry through the unpaved streets of the district tourists never saw.

Upstairs, he stretched out on the shaky bed. The rug, a vibrant swirl of red, emerald, and yellow rolled in a loose cylinder, was in the corner. Three days ago he bought it in a shop a few streets away from the hotel.

The merchant, too, would remember the plump tourist with the two memorable teeth and the sheepish ignorance about the value of the money. The merchant was a pompous fool, selected for just that trait, and when questioned would admit no confusion. He would be certain, absolutely certain, the man who bought the rug was a foreigner. Probably European. No, not just European. German. Yes, definitely a German. Was the merchant positive? Quite positive.

Philippe laced his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes, going over it once more, probing for a flaw. It was, above all, simple. In three days the city would be throbbing with the festival. A good time to kill the President? It would seem so. But not really good at all. The security forces would be especially vigilant because of the tourists, would grow more tense and watchful as the day approached. The President himself, in consultation with Colonel Borkmamm, would direct matters, would know just when and where he was most vulnerable, would be a wary old fox sniffing the wind for the slightest hint of danger.

But immediately after the festival? Ah, that was the time. There would be tourists still, wandering through the streets, clucking to each other at the smells and the dirt, taking pictures of everything the least bit different from their own cities. Security would relax. It would not be lax, never that, but it would relax. It could not be avoided. Until the President made his speech there would be electric tension among the guards, but after that, when the dangerous moment seemed to pass and the President was tucked safely away in the palace, there would be the most subtle relaxation. Under the trained machinery there were human nerves and there would be the slightest unavoidable slack. Even the President, that sly old fox, would take a final sniff of the wind and find it clear, would let his guard down fractionally, would not become careless (never that), but would—invariably—be less watchful, would be thinking about the next “dangerous” moment, the meeting of allied ministers in a month.

That moment. That was the time.

All right.

He went over it once more. The weapon brought up here to the room in pieces over the week would be inside the rug. He was a little sorry he would have to leave the recoilless rifle, an old Burney 3.45, stripped and modified, even its four-pound shell hand-machined. The rug would not cause comment. He had shown it in the lobby and in the bar three or four times. “I must show you the most fantastic bargain I bought—”

in studiously garbled guidebook phrases “—wait here.” And he would trot to his room and return, panting, with the garish rug, and unroll and spread it for the feigned admiration of the witnesses. (What a buffoon! More money than sense. Imagine all that fuss over a rug like that. Crazy tourist.) So it would cause no comment when he appeared with it yet another time.

He would place it on the table, the table exactly twenty-nine and a half inches high, one end of the rolled-up rug just happening to point at the center of the gate across the street. And then the car would just happen to leave through the gate. And just as it dipped, presenting the sun-washed rectangle, he would lean over and press the simple pressure-sensitive trigger button. The President's beautiful car had bulletproof windows, but the front window would not stop the armor-piercing shell.

Philippe willed his muscles loose: Paul Vincente would have approved the plan, he thought. It was an excellent plan, simple and effective. As soon as he fired he would simply go back through the hotel and out the back door to the waiting car where the young man would be sitting.

The young man was vain; he had not noticed how similar he was to Philippe. A short ride, a scant half mile, and Philippe would leave the car while the young man would take Highway 1-A to the north where (the young man believed) he would find another car waiting. A foolish young man, foolish and greedy. It would not take long for the north road to be blocked and the civil guard would not doubt that the young man, his pockets stuffed with money, was the one the radio was describing.

By that time the plump tourist would have vanished, and in his place a simple peasant with a flashing perfect smile would be just another among the thousands of peasants chattering about the assassination of that most wonderful paragon, the beloved President. It would take a week or so before Colonel Borkmann proclaimed himself President for life and the reevaluation of the old dead scoundrel began.

Flawless.

Philippe ran a knuckle over his chin. For a few weeks, until the new President settled in and the confusion eased, he would have to forego one of his favorite indulgences, a barber's shave. Paul Vincente used to chuckle over Philippe's sensual delight in having a barber shave him. Paul Vincente said a guerrilla who insisted on a barber— Sometimes he missed the days in the hills with Paul Vincente. But not enough ever to go through them again. Revolution was a wine for the young. As one grew

older, it was better to apply one's lessons practically, use one's education (if one survived) for the serious business of making a lot of money. The old days were exciting, but it was much better now. One job a year and enough money to maintain the house overlooking the sea, enough money to keep Bettina, slender dark Bettina, from becoming bored.

He let himself doze for an hour, drifting into something close to sleep, with the plan rolling like a movie behind his eyelids so his subconscious could examine it for weak places. When he awoke, he was satisfied and the sun was pushing diagonal mote-speckled bars through the wooden slats of the window screen. He would have his daily shave and a quiet dinner. After that perhaps a few drinks in the hotel bar and then a good night's sleep. Or he might decide to wander through Conzantca Street to see if he could find a woman resembling Bettina leaning from one of the pastel-shuttered windows.

He had been away too long. His body rebelled against the late-afternoon heat and his shirt clung wetly to his ribs. That was good; he looked more like a tourist.

"Like a clock, he is so regular," the barber joked. The barber tilted him back in the ancient chair and he almost sighed with delight as his face was swathed in thin hot towels. The good barber shave was a vanishing luxury. He had been coming here to the small shop a block from the hotel for a week and the barber pampered him as a valued customer, laughed at his halting phrases, winked at his crude questions about Conzantca Street. He smiled as his cheeks were thickly buttered with lime-scented lather. He grinned at the barber in the peeling mirror and the barber, a jolly little man with an absurd smear of mustache over red lips, grinned back. The sound of the razor kissing the strop soothed him.

The barber touched Philippe's stretched neck with the razor, let it lie across his throat.

"Sir, I have a message for you."

"Oh?" Philippe closed his eyes. The young lady who sometimes sat on the cracked leather stool and worked on his fingernails had taken an interest in the silly tourist? He smiled again, remembering the way her fingers lingered on his wrist.

"Yes. Our revered President, Paul Vincente, says, remember, always know your man, his habits, his love of the barber's shave."

Philippe's eyes snapped open. He had only the briefest instant to think of the sly old man in the palace.

*A stolen invention, a thief who posed as a friend, and a mysterious eavesdropper added up to Flame's strangest case.*

# FLAME'S REDHEADED IMPOSTOR



by **DAVID WEINBERGER**

"Yes, that's an amusing story," commented F. Lambeth Flame. "Amusing, but not really bizarre enough."

"Humph," replied Hogben Dagg, pulling his patched cardigan around his enormous girth with dignity and refusing to look crestfallen. The other residents of the Rathbone Club for Aging Detectives were glad to have Dagg put in his place.

Flame leaned on his elbows on the worn oak table in the Rathbone's



bar—The Site for Sore Eyes—and said in a confidential tone, “Now if you want to hear a really strange case, I’ll tell you about the one I just finished cracking.”

Flame’s words stopped the bickering so common at the Rathbone where the same stories were told night after night by sleuths of all sorts who had reluctantly retired, leaving the field to a younger generation who had no respect for the old ways. The new breed were all caught up with electronic equipment, hi-tech offices and high-speed car chases. Some had “No Smoking” signs in their anterooms, and, even worse, some accepted divorce work. F. Lambeth Flame was the exception. And once a month he paid his respects to his venerated elders, always with a report on his latest exploit.

Flame took a sip of his bourbon and water, the only drink served there. “I call it ‘The Redheaded League.’ ”

“I think I’ve heard of it,” said Chuck Fury, whose forte had been patriotic derring-do.

“No, no,” said Hogben Dagg impatiently. “You’re thinking of the Sherlock Holmes story entitled ‘The Red-Headed League.’ ”

“No I’m not,” said Chuck. “I’m thinking of one by Agatha Christie called, um, um . . . ”

“*Murder in Mesopotamia?*” volunteered Sam Barrows around the cigarette dangling from one lip.

“Yeah, that’s it.” Chuck sat back satisfied.

F. Lambeth Flame arched his famous eyebrows, waited until all were silent, and then began.

You know, of course (he said), that somehow I have garnered a little renown for some minor successes I’ve had when all others had failed. And for some reason my superiors on the force give me whatever cases seem beyond human ken. Thus, I was not surprised to find myself assigned to the Fulari case. For, you see, to the bureaucratic minds of my fellow officers in the Homicide Department, at first it seemed impossible to solve. Perhaps because there was no homicide at all. Unless it has a corpse lying undraped on the floor, they think it is not worth their bother. That’s because they don’t love mysteries, they just hate criminals.

So it was that one day several weeks ago an unfortunate man by the name of Gambi Fulari was directed to my desk. His thin gray hair was in disarray, but I deduced this was its usual state from the untanned

patches of his neck that obviously were in the shadow of his wild tufts. Much of his agitation apparently had been vented in the triplicate interviews with the form-filling policemen downstairs, and as he approached I could see the sweat evaporating from his brow. I motioned him past the desks occupied by the various species of New York's Finest, and said, "Sit down, doctor. We will find your invention."

"Why, thank you." He lowered his stocky frame into the straight-backed chair next to my desk. "But how did you know all that?"

"Tut," replied I, "it is obvious from the precise way you observe your surroundings that you are a man meticulous with details. This plus your white lab coat tells me you are a scientist. From the grease marks on your cuff and a trace of fine metal filings caught in the crease of your coat I surmise you deal with mechanical objects, that is, you are an inventor. Your lack of a wedding band indicates you share with me the state of blessed unmatrimony, as further attested by the wide nicotine stains between your fingers caused by smoking too many cigars, a habit in which no married man can long indulge. Your agitated state says something most treasured by you is gone. From the peanut butter stuck between your teeth—marred, by the way, by a touch of grease—I see that you are so devoted you even take your lunch in your workshop. So, you are a bachelor in love with your science who has lost something, causing you much turmoil. Ergo, an invention has been stolen." It really was obvious in the extreme to the trained eye, but Dr. Fulari was so greatly impressed that I had, to let him rest before he could be induced to begin his tale.

"My invention, the crowning triumph of my career, has been stolen." I nodded patiently. "Twelve years of work. Gone!"

"There, there. We'll recover it. Now tell me all about it."

He was looking like a beaten man. "There's hardly anything to tell. I was taking the prototype to my patent attorney's office—his name is Harley Dree—when Sir Albert stopped me in the middle of the street, showed me a revolver, and took the suitcase I was carrying in."

"Sir Albert?"

"Sir Albert Friddendon, the British Texas oil man."

"I'm afraid we'll have to back up a bit, Dr. Fulari. You know who took the invention?" I was wondering why such a straightforward case had been referred to my desk.

"No."

"But you said Sir Albert . . ."

"That's just it. It wasn't really Sir Albert. It was just someone made up like him. I could see he was wearing a toupee, and his mustache was falling off a bit. And his nose was too large, even for Sir Albert. I could see where the putty ended and his real nose began."

"I see. Now exactly what happened?"

"I had been up all night, perfecting the adjustments on my machine. You see, Harley Dree had come over yesterday for a demonstration and although it worked all right, I thought it needed just a tad of tightening over by the hydrofilteoxenators. So early this morning I called him and left a message on his answering machine saying that the invention was ready and I'd be bringing it over at noon on my way to the YMCA. I swim every day."

"And what time did you leave your message?"

"Probably around six A.M. Then I went to sleep, woke at eleven, and did some final polishing. Harley's office is just across the park so I decided to walk, for it seemed a nice day for a stroll. It didn't end up that way, as you can see." He looked toward the window. It was raining lightly outside. "I had just reached the other side of the park—I was hurrying for, of course, the rain started almost as soon as I stepped outside—when this fellow dressed up like Sir Albert dashed out of nowhere, took the valise, and ran to a car he had double parked. By the time I had my wits back, he was gone. And twelve years were gone!"

"But surely, doctor, you have your notes, your diagrams, a complete plan of the mechanism."

"No. None of that. You see, I work these things out with my hands right on the actual materials. I have no head for seeing things in two-dimensional representations. I'm rather well known for this weakness." He blushed shyly. "All I had was the machine. It would take me a year, maybe two, to reproduce it. Not only would I be back at trial and error to redesign it, but the mechanism itself was exceedingly complicated. So whoever has the machine virtually owns the patent. It's an outrage!"

"Tell me, doctor, what is this machine of yours?" The present tense was calculated.

"You'll laugh. You'll think it useless."

"I assure you I won't."

"Then I'll tell you. It was a machine that turns oil into water, producing several harmless elements on the side."

"Not useless at all. I can think of several uses. Hair dressers would be

able to make greasy hair more manageable. If ever we make a car that runs on water, the oil companies would still be in business. And it would be of inestimable value to the Italian restaurant industry which would save a king's ransom in laundry bills for cleaning their table cloths of spilled salad dressing."

"That was my first thought, too. But it would also enable the oil companies to clean up ocean oil spills."

"A most valuable invention, sir!" said I. "We must recover it before the wrong hands turn it to nefarious purposes."

After some more chat, the substance of which I am sure you can imagine for yourselves (except for the fact that Dr. Fulári could not remember anything about the getaway car), I paid a call on Harley Dree, Patent Attorney-at-Law. His office was in a sleek, expensive skyscraper, but the walls needed painting and, judging by the indentations in his stained carpet, half his furniture had been repossessed. His secretary, a blonde whose face and form had enough voltage to jump-start a jeep, lost her welcoming smile when I told her I was with the police and therefore not about to bring some much-needed cash to this marginal operation. "I'll see if he's in," she said. She held a brief colloquy with her intercom which resulted in her pointing over her shoulder with her perfect thumb at the door to Mr. Dree's inner sanctum.

His reception was much more animated. "Isn't it just awful," he said, shaking my hand moistly. The cheap cut of his suit did nothing to detract from a mountainous paunch stuck on to a normal frame. "Here, have a seat," he said, gesturing at a salmon-colored leatherette easy chair which I would rather not have occupied for fear of its clinging to my tweeds. The physique is the literal embodiment of the man, and if I were Dree I either would not have let myself become so gelatinous or at worst would have paid handsomely to have myself draped more astutely and less stoutly.

"You're here about poor Gambi's calamity, I assume."

"Quite right."

"Terrible thing. Absolutely irreplaceable."

"You have seen the petrometamorphohydrolator, I understand."

A nimbus of puzzlement shadowed his brow. "The what? Oh, the thingamajig. Yeah. I got a demonstration yesterday afternoon over in Gambi's workshop. Amazing gizmo. It's got these thousands of tiny teeth

that rotate at some incredible speed, with some vacuum thingies and some electric fields or something."

"Should you be telling me all this?"

"Sure. Why not? You can't patent the idea, only the mechanism. Heck, the idea is simple enough. Even I understand it. Gambi says it's just like digestion. You break up the oil into itsy bitsy parts and get what you want out of it until there's no oil left. See?" Dr. Fulari had, of course, explained the electromechanical process to me in much greater detail. "The amazing thing," he continued, "is that although it's only the size of a typewriter, it can convert four hundred barrels of oil an hour. Something about the magnetic drive rotors spinning at subatomic speeds, or something. Gambi says his new system of gears gets the oil moving so fast that it's like running it through a nuclear power plant. Amazing what these little guys think of."

"Dr. Fulari had an appointment with you this afternoon?"

Dree rubbed his stomach as if he needed proof that a crash diet had not removed it while he wasn't looking. "Yeah. Frankly, business has been a little slow. Too many inventors work for big companies with their own patent lawyers. So I called my answering machine this morning around eight to see if there were some reason for me to come in before this afternoon. I like to be here in the afternoons no matter what. Anyway, there was a message from Gambi saying he was bringing the gizmo in around noon. I was going to arrange to have professional drawings of it made so we could begin patenting it right away. A lot of people would love to get their hands on it, believe you me!"

"So you stayed home all morning."

"No. I read the paper and then I headed off to my club, the Lucky Ace Fitness Club, and steamed for a while. I like to keep in shape."

I let my silence speak for me. Then I inquired about the time of this event.

"Oh, I got there around nine, and steamed and chatted till around eleven. Then I had lunch at The Bagel Maker and toddled up here around eleven thirty. Gambi arrived in a daze about a quarter after twelve, and I told him to call the police. Inventors are really children at times."

"Who else knew of the machine?"

"Plenty of people. Gambi's been working on it for years, and lots of people knew it was coming along."

"Might anyone have known that Dr. Fulari was bringing it over today?"

"Might have known? Well, um . . . " He paused to fidget in his seat, which responded with an ugly creak. "The fact of the matter is that I may have mentioned it to some of the regulars in the steam room." He looked at me guiltily. "They have all known for years what Gambi was up to. They used to rib me about it. In fact, just this morning . . . " He stopped cold.

"This morning what happened?"

"Well, they were teasing me again, coming up with all sorts of uses for the machine. Like, they said if Ali Ben Sharma's country wanted, during the next oil glut they could turn some of their excess oil into water and irrigate the deserts." I looked a question at him. "Ali Ben Sharma is the right-hand man of some Arab zillionaire, Abu Dali Dama or something. He always gets ridden because . . . "

"Because he is an Arab visitor to our shores? A most despicable way to treat a guest. Perhaps you should tell me who else was there."

"Okay, okay," he said with the annoyance of one who knows himself justly accused. "Let's see, there was that English guy, Hoagie Bampf. And a good-for-nothing promoter who goes by the name of Cliff Good. And the Arab. Oh and one little fat guy I didn't recognize who just sat in the back minding his own business. Didn't say a word."

"Does Hoagie Bampf work for Sir Albert Friddendon?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Sir Albert must have been in a position to know about your appointment with Dr. Fulari for it to seem plausible that he had stolen the machine. Both Sir Albert and Hoagie Bampf are English. Elementary. Tell me, how long have you known Dr. Fulari?"

"Oh, twelve, thirteen years. He came in one day with a new kind of hair dryer. It was supposed to dry your hair with a single blast. Microwaves or something. It worked fine on me, so I took it to Cliff Good who was going to promote it and sell it. Fine. I sank a bundle into the production company Good formed, and then Good came back and said that the thing didn't work. Singed the eyebrows off his dog or something. I lost my bundle. Makes you kind of wish inventors would check their stuff out first. They're really children sometimes."

Dree described all the others in the steam room as in good shape. "You see, the Lucky Ace Fitness Club isn't so nice a joint but it's right downtown and the people who go there generally are pretty serious about exercising. It draws a mixed crowd. Some very rich people go there

because it's handy, and some not-so-rich guys like me go because it's not so expensive. So, you're going to speak with Slim Friddendon. Well, you have quite a treat in store."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll find out." He chuckled and showed me to the door.

Before leaving, I paid my respects to the receptionist, who turned out to be named Rita. "By the way, Rita," I said casually, "were there any other messages on Mr. Dree's answering machine this morning?"

"Nope, not a one," she replied, automatically touching the top of her low-cut blouse in a vain effort to hide her décolletage.

"Thank you," said I, gladly departing Harley Dree's humble place of a humble business.

The weather having cleared up, I walked, using that long-legged stride of mine which is so recognizable and occasionally imitated. The evaporating rain pleasantly scented the heat of the city, and by the time I arrived at my destination in a fashionable section, I was quite invigorated.

In response to my knocking, the door was opened a crack, enabling me to see the entirety of a youth for whom the word "callow" was coined. From the tips of his pointed, tooled leather boots to the red bandana around his neck, he was every inch a cowboy. From his voice box on up, unfortunately, he was all cockney. I immediately noticed a shaving nick on his left cheek. "Wot is it?" he asked in his nasal way. I identified myself and without further comment or civility he let me enter. Kicking a chair by way of indicating where I should sit, he left me to gaze at the astounding decor. What had once been furnished in rare woods and chandeliers had been stripped to knotty pine and rawhide. Beside the wooden rocker in which I had deposited myself was a bale of hay still fresh from the field, permeating the room with an odor that would have recalled my days on my uncle's farm had my uncle had a farm. Across the room was a moose head from each antler of which hung a ten-gallon hat made of woven straw.

I had not had time even to begin to observe and classify all the details when the callow youth returned. "Is royal bloody 'ighness will see you now," and he led me to what once had been a study but now was more like the O.K. Corral.

"Detective Flame, it is a pleasure to meet you, sir!" said Sir Albert, putting aside a lariat he had been attempting to twirl. "I have followed

your exploits enthusiastically! Please come in. Here, I see you have met my loyal retainer, Hoagie Bampf. He is my domestic, but also something of my protégé."

Bampf glowered. "Rescued mie frumma-clors o bloody pofferty, 'e did. Frankly, Hoid ratha buy poowa." I will spare you further attempts at rendering his speech. Sir Albert tried to dismiss him, but I suggested that he stay. With ill-grace, Hoagie consented.

But no longer can I make ordinary what was in fact extraordinary. For if Sir Albert was not exactly the ugliest man I had ever seen, he certainly was the most interesting. Where to begin? A man well over six feet tall, he was dressed in clothes that combined the worst of Glenn Campbell and Liberace. Not an inch of his Western duds did not glitter. He could not have had any more shiny metal on him if he were wearing chain mail. This was topped by an enormous straw cowboy hat with a bright purple feather in it. His spurs glistened in the lamplight. It was a sight that would have sent a horse into labor.

Yet that was nothing compared to what he had been born with. His face was roundish, if you care to call it a face. Rather, it was a nose. Never have I seen one like it. It was the shape and texture of a good sized Idaho potato. Underneath it was a trim red mustache, matching the crimson thatch he was pleased to call hair. What his nose and hair did not obscure was covered by his enormous black-rimmed sunglasses, except for a bit of tissue stuck to his chin where he had cut himself shaving. Add to this an aristocratic British voice straining for a Texas twang, and you will understand why I took a seat even before one was offered.

"I'm afraid I have distressing news," said I when sufficiently recovered.

"Good lord, out with it."

"Perhaps you know Gambi Fulari's petrometamorphohydrolator."

"Yes, of course. He was taking it to Harley Dree today. Nothing happened to him, did it?"

"He is unharmed, except for the extreme distress of having had his invention snatched from him."

"Oh no, that's dreadful. The poor chap. He must be a shambles. Tell me, how did it come to pass?"

"He was carrying it on the street and someone grabbed it. The troublesome part is that the assailant fits your description precisely."

"No! My word! You don't suppose it was just someone who happens to look like me, do you?"



"Cor! Bloody likely," snorted his protégé.

"Surely you don't suspect . . ."

"No, my lord. Dr. Fulari got a good look at him and saw that his hair as a wig and that his false mustache was falling off."

"Thank goodness for that! I'm in a very sensitive business, and appearances count. My investors rely on me absolutely and I would hate come under suspicion, even for a minute."

"You need not worry. Only the culprit has anything to fear. But perhaps you could tell me just what your business is."

"Yes, my pleasure. I came over to these shores eight years ago for I've always been in love with your West and knew I could not achieve part's ease without visiting the land of six-shooters and rattlesnakes."

"That and the Brits were taking all your bloody loot in bloody taxes," chimed in Hoagie. "Had to bloody well put the family castle in my name, he did," he confided.

Sir Albert chuckled: "True, true. But that hardly changes the fact that we've always been infatuated with the American frontier. I went to Texas first of all and with my dwindling inheritance bought a parcel of land in the Panhandle which, lo and behold, turned up oil. Not a fortune, mind you, but enough to keep me going. To make a long story short, I was able to interest some wealthy types in letting me sink their money into some new wells and rights and so forth. And, as you can see, I've done rather well for myself and them."

He gazed with love at his surroundings. "Of course I'd taken a lively interest in the reports on Dr. Fulari's progress, as delivered by Hoagie. He steams with Harley Dree, a patent attorney, you know." I said that I did know. "Not a very amiable chap. Any other information with which can help you?"

"Just two awkward questions. First, could I trouble you to tell me how you spent your morning? Purely routine."

"Of course. Glad to. I got up at sun-up, as usual, and fixed myself a mess of bacon and beans and good strong java. I had my lariat lesson at nine while Hoagie was off for his communal sweat. Then I went for a run on Old Paint over in the Eastside Stables. I got back at ten thirty, had a chat with Hoagie about the day's schedule. That's when he told me about Dr. Fulari's appointment; he knew I would be interested in learning it had finally come to fruition. After that I went into the basement where I worked at the anvil and forge for a good two hours. And I came up

around one for lunch. Sufficient?"

"Quite adequate, thank you. And you, Mr. Bampf?"

He cocked one lip at me. "Up at eight. Made 'is 'ighness's sleepin' roll. Out to steam. Back at ten. Been polishing leather ever since. An' I clear, copper?"

"Indeed."

Sir Albert started to rise to see me out.

"I have one further question, I'm afraid." There was simply no graceful way to ask, so I just blurted it out. "Mr. Bampf, do you know if Harley Dree ever wears a girdle?"

For the first time he gave us the benefit of a full smile, an event which like a solar eclipse, should never be viewed directly. "Cor! Caught him at it once. The gang got quite a thrill out of that one. Still put it to him now and then, just to see his white tum blush rosy."

I left with alacrity, still having two calls to make that day.

The first took me to Cliff Good, the promoter Harley Dree had mentioned. I found him behind a clean desk in the midst of what appeared to be a miser's attic. Cartons opened and sealed were stacked like cordwood, a pile of unidentifiable metal pieces bundled into neat little cellophane bags were heaped four feet high in a corner.

Cliff Good was oblivious to the chaos. He wore a tight flower print shirt open to below the ribs, revealing a clump of hair on his sternum supported by an enormous golden object on a chain. His jet black hair was swept back with the aid of brilliantine and from the slight darkening of the skin on his hairline I deduced that his natural color had been altered. With a friendly but vacuous grin he invited me in and said, "What can I do you for?"

I briefly recounted the circumstances that brought me there. He seemed surprised but not upset. "I got no sympathy for that Fulari guy. 'You've dealt with him before?'"

"Yeah. Got burned. That's a joke 'cause I really got *burned*. Him an' that instant hair dryer. I put myself on the line for that one. And you know what I got for it? I'll tell you what I got for it. I tried it on my dog. Ever try to buy a toupee for a dog? Awful sight to see Skipper hidin' from the neighborhood dogs. That's what I got for it. A bald dog and bad reputation. You know what a bad rep means in my game? Death. That's what it means."

"And just what is your game?"

The question seemed to calm him. "Product development and promotion. Ideas, Inc. That's me. Of course when things get slow, I import tuff from overseas and arrange to have them distributed." He gestured to the mounds of stuff in his room. By "overseas" I assumed he meant Hong Kong. "There's always a market for something useful or novel, you know? Cereal companies, stores looking for giveaways. Here, let me show you." He swivelled and grasped one of the cellophane packets from the mound. With practiced hands he ripped it open and shook out its contents. I could now see it was a small tin tank. "You just fill up a balloon like his . . ." which he proceeded to do, turning his face the hue of Bour-leaux, ". . . and attach it here . . ." which he did with difficulty, ". . . and plug a straw into the bottom . . ." But when he released it, the balloon leaped free of the tank and drove crazily through the room. "Let me try a different one."

"No need."

"Well, anyway, you stick the tank on top of a glass and put the straw into the milk or whatever, and the balloon forces bubbles up through the milk, carbonating it. Kids love it." Before I could return to the topic at hand he had reached into his top drawer and retrieved a menacing-looking object the size of a fist. "This here's going to be a big seller as soon as I can find someone with the vision to market it. It's a cordless razor that doesn't even use electricity. You just pump these handles with one hand like this, and it starts to go." It made an uneven rasping sound. "Here, take this one. I'll mark it up to promo."

"You gave one to Hoagie Bampf, did you not?"

"Yeah."

That explained how servant and master had come by their shaving cuts. I desposited the evil instrument in my pocket where from time to time it made little growling noises as it worried away at my lining.

In my most disarming tone, I said, "I was wondering if you noticed anybody new in the steam room this morning."

"Let's see, there was me and Hoagie and Harley, and that Arab guy. I think that was it."

"No fat little man sitting in one corner?"

"Yeah, come to think of it."

"Do you remember what he looked like?"

"Well, he was fat and kind of little. But it was steamy in there. Can't

see too well without your fog lights." He smiled broadly.

"One last question. I see by the scrapings on your door that you once had a partner."

"What? Oh yeah, ages ago. Guy by the name of Herb Plentry. I even changed my name when we signed up. Good and Plentry. Get it? But it didn't work out. After the Fulari deal got screwy, we didn't get along. He had no resilience, you know what I mean? He formed his own company, called Plentry Good. Got me kind of mad, you know? He blamed me for that hair dryer thing, and he's been after my goat ever since. We actually split up over something else, a nutty idea for a giant transistor radio that put out eighty thousand megawatts of sound. I told him, 'But Herbie, where the heck are you going to find a place where you can turn one of those babies up?' Well, he sure got the last laugh on me with that one. Still hates my guts. I'll never understand guys like Herb. Live and let live is what I say."

My final interview was by far the briefest for by now I knew which questions to ask. Ali Ben Sharma met me in his apartment, a fourth floor walk-up jammed between the Pussycat Triple-X Cinema and a hot camera shop. Yet the modest apartment was so perfectly appointed that I unconsciously wiped my feet before entering. Sharma was a lithe man in his late twenties, beginning to lose his thick black hair. Yet this in no way detracted from his remarkable good looks. His were not, of course, the features of a department store mannequin. His nose was too large, his well-scrubbed skin too olive. Yet the effect was startling.

"My word, that's terrible!" he said in response to my opening sentences. His voice was perfectly modulated and bore no trace of an accent. "The poor man. He must be heartbroken."

"He's quite at wit's end, yes."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Just a few questions. You regularly take steam baths at the Lucky Ace Fitness Club."

"Yes. Of course you know that is how I learned of Dr. Fulari's invention. I would have been most eager to see it in operation."

"I imagine it would have been useful to your employer."

"My employer? Ah, I see. You've been listening to that drivel the men in the steam room spout. They assume my uncle, Abu Daba Haman, is fantastically wealthy because he is an Arab. The sad truth is that my uncle

is a minor executive in an oil exporting firm. He has put me through school and is lending me the wherewithal for my present studies in advanced engineering, even though it has meant some hardship for him. I only wish there were some service I could do him to repay his years of generosity."

"You were born in this country?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"No one with an Arabian language as his mother tongue could master the English consonants without an accent unless he immigrated here before the age of three."

"My mother came here shortly before I was born. She died when I was two. My father could not join me because he was in jail awaiting execution. A political crime. Uncle Abu has looked after me ever since from afar. No repayment could ever be adequate."

"His burden must be lightened by the knowledge that his efforts have been so gratefully received."

"If only that could be enough. I am afraid he is soon to be fired from his position. What will happen to him then I dare not contemplate."

"A shame. Please call on me if there is any way I can help."

"Thank you. But . . ."

"Ah, a brief question. Did you notice a small, fat man in the corner of the steam room?"

"Funny you should mention it. Yes, I did. And he seemed to be watching us intently. But it was too misty to see anything."

I now had all the information I needed. My chief likes me to call all the suspects together; he says it lends class to the proceedings and he lends me his office for the purpose. So, I rather forcefully invited to my little gathering at nine that night each of the people with whom I had spoken. By promising that I was ready to clear up the mystery, it was not hard to entice them to come, except for Cliff Good who claimed to have tickets to a baseball game that night. Since I number Reggie Jackson among my admirers, I was able to ensure him tickets for the dug-out in some future game.

By nine the little office was crowded. Cliff Good had been the first to arrive. I seated him at the end of the first row of chairs facing the desk. Gambi Fulari arrived immediately afterwards, wringing his hands in anguish and hope alternately. It was all I could do to get him to sit down. I put him two seats from Cliff. Sir Albert strode in next in his normal

attire, except that his hat now had a green feather in it, followed by Hoagie Bampf who was playing with something in his pocket. I put Hoagie next to Fulari and Sir Albert between Hoagie and Cliff. Harley Dree entered with some agitation. After all, he stood to make a lot of money from the machine. I put him behind Fulari. Rita, his secretary, was with him. Remember, I said I asked *everyone* I had spoken with that day. She sat next to him and crossed her legs, as if ready to take dictation. "I hope this is important," she said. "I'm going to be late for my rehearsal." Apparently she was playing the lead in a local production of *Mother Courage*. I assured her she would be out of the room surprisingly quickly.

Yet I might have been proved untrue to my word if Ali Ben Sharma had come much later than he did. We all sat there until quarter after nine, very awkwardly chatting or very awkwardly remaining silent, waiting for the young Arab student to arrive. When he did, he was not the same polite youth I had seen earlier. "It's about time," said Cliff Good. "Your camel get a flat?"

Sharma shot him a glance that could have opened a can of tuna. "I was studying," he said curtly and sat down next to Rita.

"Good evening," I began in my pleasant and relaxing manner. "We are all here because in one way or another our lives have intersected the theft of the petrometamorphohydrolator."

"Wot?" asked Hoagie Bampf.

"The oil-into-water thingie," Harley impatiently explained. "Come on, Flame. The suspense is killing us."

"Before I unmask the thief, who by the way is in this room, I must ask a question or two. Dr. Fulari?"

The doctor almost jumped out of his seat. "Yes?"

"Think carefully. Did your assailant wear a hat?"

"Most definitely not."

"I thought as much. Cliff Good . . . ." All heads turned towards him. He toyed with the chain around his neck. Hoagie Bampf smiled wickedly. "Mr. Good, could you describe Herb Plentry for us?"

"Herb? Why, um, Herb was just your ordinary sort of guy. Medium height, medium build. Except he had a way of clicking his teeth together when he talked that could drive you crazy."

"Thank you, that will do nicely. Now then, I have known almost from the beginning who the culprit is." Every eye was upon me. "But we on the New York Police Force like to go over every possibility before making

an arrest. You all undoubtedly have considered many possibilities, but there is one that I dare say has escaped your notice. You have assumed that whoever impersonated Sir Albert when making the grab changed back to his—or her—regular appearance later today. But suppose for a minute that that were not the case . . . ”

Dr. Fulari had an alert, imaginative brain, and finished my sentence for me in his own mind. “You’re not Sir Albert!” he cried, and throwing himself over Hoagie Bampf, he reached for Sir Albert’s face like an owl descending on a field mouse. Hoagie had only enough time to utter “Bloody wot!” before Dr. Fulari, his fury unbound, pulled at Sir Albert’s mustache, which peeled off in one smooth motion with a loud rip. “Unmasked, you villain!” cried Dr. Fulari jubilantly. “Now for the nose!”

Sir Albert tried to rise, but Dr. Fulari was lying across him, pressing Hoagie Bampf against him as well. To no avail he tried to forestall Dr. Fulari’s snatching of his nose. Issuing a bloodcurdling yell that stopped the incensed inventor, Sir Albert rubbed his nose, which now was stamped with Dr. Fulari’s fingerprints. “I say. That’s my nose, old chap.”

And so it was.

Here F. Lambeth Flame stopped his narrative with an air of satisfaction. He carefully lit his pipe which had gone dead at the beginning of his story. When the shag was at last fumigating the room, he put his hands behind his head and said, “You now know everything I knew. Whom would you have arrested?”

The only sound was that of bourbon splashing into Sam Barrows’ glass.

“Perhaps I should say,” commented Flame to distract them from their difficulties, “that Sir Albert quite reasonably explained that he had tried the manual razor maliciously passed on from Cliff Good by Hoagie Bampf and had accidentally removed a large chunk of his mustache when the device had skidded from his chin. He then shaved the whole thing off and bought a false one to cover until it could begin to grow back. So much for the mystery of the false mustache. Come on now, lads, apply the old gray cells.”

Chuck Fury was the first to break the silence. “I say it’s the Ay-rab. He admitted he wanted to repay his uncle, and his uncle works for an oil company and could use a boost there. This oil-and-water gadget could be just the thing an OPEC nation could use to bring us to our knees. The way I see it, the CIA . . . ”

"No, no," interrupted Hogben Dagg, his huge body aquiver with annoyance. "First of all, how could an olive-skinned youngster impersonate a fair-skinned Britisher?"

"Easy. You said he looked well-scrubbed. That's because all day he was washing make-up off his face."

"Give up on it," said Officer Joe Munroe. "You've got to do these things methodically, slowly. It's patience that makes a great dick. You know it and I know it. So let's can the malarkey and get down to cases. The way I see it, what you want to do is retrace the movements of Cliff Good's partner, Herb Plentry. A lot of digging will show that he was out to get whatever Good wanted, and right now that means he was after the doc's invention."

"Close," said Stu Larchmont, a Californian who had never really adjusted to the hectic air of the East. "Close but not right. Dig, dig, dig. I knew from the outset. Good's partner, Plentry, is going to turn out to be Ali Ben Sharma's uncle. You see, his mother had a brief affair with an American G.I. who then went into the patent lawyer business . . ."

Sam Barrows blew smoke in Larchmont's direction. "You always think that, you always think it's somebody's long-lost uncle or father or brother. And that's why you'll always be a second-rate peeper more at home in the cheap motels of California than . . ."

"Why you slow-talking creep, I'll . . ."

Flame interposed himself between the two old friends and bade Barrows to continue. "It's like this, see," Barrows said. "When there's a barrel of trouble you can bet some dame is behind it. That Rita dish, for instance. Now, you very cleverly drew out of her that she listened to the tape on the answering machine when you asked her if there were any other messages on it. I liked that. Real class. So we know she knew. Next, we know Harley Dree has a girdle, so he could pass for Sir Albert if this Harley guy also wore elevator shoes. Add that to a beautiful dame with gamms on her that won't quit . . ."

"Nobody said anything about her legs," Officer Joe Munroe interjected.

"Still, it stands to reason."

Hogben Dagg had been sitting with his eyes closed, pulling on his left earlobe, a sure sign of deep thought. Now his voice boomed out. "If you will restrain yourself, I will solve the mystery for you." His presence was such that the gaggle of private eyes actually listened to him. "The culprit clearly is Dr. Gambi. He invented that manifest folderol about its being



'Sir Albert but not Sir Albert' in order to throw suspicion off himself without doing anyone else any real harm. Then he sat in the steam room almost unnoticed . . .

"But what's the motive?" Barrows inquired.

"Yes. I hadn't considered that. Wait. It was Harley Dree, then. He intended to patent it under his own name."

The group looked to Flame who was shaking his head gently and sagely smiling.

"Valiant tries, lads. Valiant but off the mark."

"Well, are you going to make us wait all night?"

"Just a bit longer. You need first to understand the vital clue. It was raining out, yet our culprit wore no hat. What could explain such a slip, for Sir Albert is known for his outlandish hats? Our culprit knew everything else about how Sir Albert looks."

"I know!" Hogben Dagg fairly shouted. "It was Hoagie Bampfl!"

"Steady, steady. All will be revealed. Our culprit surely knew that Sir Albert always wore a hat. Did he have trouble finding a large cowboy hat? Not likely in this westernized era. Was he just careless? Not when he was so careful in every other detail. We are left then with one supposition. The slip was no slip.

"I immediately asked myself why someone might not wear a hat in the rain. To protect it? But our culprit would be more interested in looking like Sir Albert than in preserving a hat he undoubtedly would soon be discarding surreptitiously. Besides, straw hats are not much hurt by a light rainfall. Only one answer was possible: our culprit wore no hat so that his hair might be more visible.

"But now we want to know why the culprit wanted his hair visible. And the answer is as plain as the nose on Sir Albert's face: so Dr. Fulari could see he was wearing a wig."

"How do you figure it, Flame?" asked Officer Joe Munroe.

"Like this, Joe. The man dressed up like Sir Albert Friddendon was . . ." Flame savored the moment " . . . Sir Albert Friddendon!" Now the sweet expostulations came from his amazed audience. It was Hogben Dagg who gave them their clearest articulation. "You mean to say Sir Albert was dressed up like himself all along?"

"I do, sir. He shaved off his mustache and sloppily applied an obviously phony one. He put a dab of putty on his nose simply so Dr. Fulari would detect it and assume the rest of the nose's enormity also was putty. He

pasted a cheap red wig over his own hair for the same reason. All this so he could get the treasured invention, pay his debts, and probably hire a better manservant. All the tomfoolery was necessary to make him the one man we would not suspect. A unique case of a man impersonating himself."

"Remarkable," said Hogben in a rare moment of partial humility.

"You got it figured," admitted Officer Joe Munroe.

"Pretty," commented Sam Barrows.

"Dead to rights," growled Chuck Fury.

Stu Larchmont waited for the rest to finish. "What I want to know is, who was the fat little guy in the steam room?"

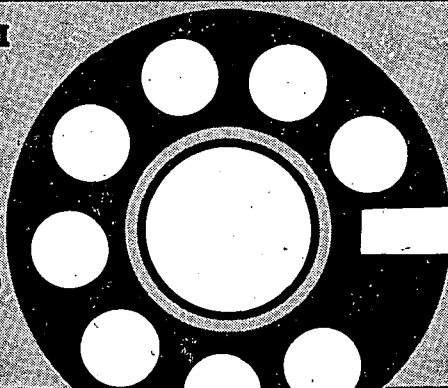
Flame arched an eyebrow. "Sometimes, my dear colleague, even fat little guys need to relax."

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*He was her teacher and he was too old for her, her father said.  
But Bannon didn't like the case.*

# MY LITTLE GIRL



by **KENNETH GAVRELL**

**H**e had made an appointment with my secretary for eleven o'clock. I had been out arguing with the telephone company about three calls to Buenos Aires that I hadn't made, but I returned just before eleven. He was already waiting in the outer office: a tall, well-built, expensively-suited man in his early forties. His hair and mustache were turning grey, and his eyes were about the same color. As I came in, he rose.

"Sr. Soto?" I asked.

"Sí." He stuck out a large hand. "*Encantado.*"

His voice sounded hard, almost harsh. I shook the hand and led him into my own office. While I switched on the air conditioner, he settled himself into the chair in front of my desk.

"*Hace calor estos días,*" he said. "It's hot these days."

I agreed politely and took the chair behind the desk.

"Well, what can I do for you, Sr. Soto?"

"You know something about me?"

"You designed a house for a friend of mine. He liked your work, except for the fact he has a small leak in his living room ceiling. I know you live in Apolo and probably pull down more in a month than I do in a year. That's about all."

"There's always the small leak," he said. "Nothing's perfect."

I waited for him to get down to business. He looked uncomfortable.

"I have a daughter," he said. "University age. Her name is Isabel."

"You've come about your daughter?"

"I need absolute discretion from you. I'm willing to pay for it."

"A private detective wouldn't be in business very long if he weren't discreet. What is this problem with your daughter?"

"I think she is seeing a man I would rather she not be seeing."

"What, exactly, is her age, Sr. Soto?"

"Nineteen."

"Possibly old enough to choose her own acquaintances."

"I didn't come here to ask your opinion," he said shortly.

"What do you mean 'seeing' a man?"

"Just exactly what you think I mean." He pulled out a cigarette. I pushed my ashtray across the desk and he dropped his match into it.

"Who's the man?" I asked.

"A professor at the university; he teaches astronomy. His name is Ronald Murray. This man is my own age, Sr. Bannon. He's no good for her. I understand he is divorced—twice. There should be some law against this sort of thing."

"You could probably cause him to lose his job," I said. "Universities frown on this sort of thing. Is that what you want?"

"I just want him to leave my daughter alone," Soto said.

"If he is seeing her, we can probably scare him off," I said. "But we'd need proof to do it—which could make this a pretty dirty business."

"I don't want Isabel hurt in any way," Soto said. "I just want to end

this—grotesque affair.”

“I don’t see how it can be done without hurting her one way or another,” I said. “I take it you want me to institute a surveillance on your daughter.”

“No, no,” he said. He pounded his cigarette into extinction in my ashtray. “I want *him*, this Murray, followed.”

“I suppose it would come to the same thing,” I agreed.

I lit a butt of my own. “You know, Sr. Soto, I hate this kind of case. It stinks. You take on enough cases like this and there isn’t enough deodorant soap in the world to take the smell out.”

“Then why are you still talking to me?” he asked pointedly.

“Because I know that if I don’t take this on, someone else will. In this town you wouldn’t have to do much shopping, and I’d rather have your daughter’s affairs in my hands than in the hands of quite a few I could mention. There’s always the good possibility you’re all wrong about her—I’d be happier if it turned out that way.”

“That’s why I came to you,” he said. “I made some inquiries before I called you.”

“Then you knew I might very well refuse the case.”

“Yes.” Suddenly he softened up: “*Mire*, Sr. Bannon, please do it. They say you are a man of some honor.”

“I’d suggest you forget the whole thing, Sr. Soto. If your daughter isn’t having an affair with this professor, you’ve lost nothing. And if she is, you’re opening up a mess she’ll never forgive you for. She’s not exactly a teenager.”

“She is to *me*,” he raised his voice again. “She’s my little girl—and I can’t bear the thought of that slimy, middle-aged opportunist—” He cut himself off, so upset by the idea that it strangled the words in his throat. Then he breathed out very slowly. “I need to know. I need some peace of mind.”

I reflected that peace of mind was a commodity in short supply these days. It was hard to refuse anybody a chance at it. “*Está bien*,” I said. “Give me all the details.”

As I’d suspected, he didn’t have much in the way of evidence to base his suspicions on, but he had the Latin inclination to read an affair into any situation that offered an opportunity for one. The girl had been in Murray’s class one semester. She was just beginning her second semester with him. They had been seen together a few times on campus. Murray had called the house once. The girl had talked about him on one occasion

with what her father described as an "unhealthy adulation." In addition, she'd been absent from home a great deal of late and had been acting "strangely"—withdrawn, secretive, "as if in a romantic dreamworld." That was about it. Murray lived in a bachelor apartment near the university. The father didn't know much about him, except that he was known to give parties. The main evidence against him seemed to be that he was twice divorced, pretty good-looking, and apparently an inspiring teacher.

"Does your daughter have any close friends?" I asked.

"She did. But lately she hasn't been spending much time with them—at least from what I can gather. They used to call the house frequently, but in the last couple of months they haven't."

Then a thought struck him: "You mustn't talk to them. That would be disastrous."

"I wasn't planning to."

"Whatever your fee is, that's no problem," he said.

"I didn't think it would be. I'll need to see a photograph of your daughter, Sr. Soto."

"I know. I brought one with me."

He passed me a 3 × 5 color snapshot showing a slim, pretty girl wearing rust jeans and a lemon colored blouse. She looked like a girl who'd had all the best. I rather liked the face.

"How recent is this photo?"

"About four months ago."

I handed it back to him. "What kind of car does she drive?"

"A red Honda Accord, brand new. She loves that car."

"I'll keep in touch with you," I said. "It shouldn't take very long to find out one way or the other."

"Here's my card," he said. "My office is at home."

"Does your wife know about this?" I asked.

"No. If she answers the phone, tell her you're a client of mine."

"I doubt if I'll ever be a client of yours," I said. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

"Only to be discreet," he said. "*Ella es mi muñequita*. She's my little girl."

It was going to be hard on him when he someday admitted to himself that little girls grew up. Some of them grew up with a vengeance.

There are few things more useful to a private detective than the tele-

phone book. A surprising number of Murrays lived in the San Juan metropolitan area—nine of them. Ronald H. Murray lived in Condominio Ambassador, Rio Piedras. I knew it: one of a string of them on de Diego Street, not far from the university campus. I jotted down his phone number for no very good reason. Then I told Maria I'd be gone an hour or so and drove over to Obras Publicas in Miramar.

Obras Publicas houses our Motor Vehicles Bureau. I have a friend there named Sara in the registration section. She's a plumpish, middle-aged woman with outrageous copper-dyed hair who has a crush on me and also gets a thrill out of consorting with a private detective.

Her eyes lit up conspiratorially as I approached her desk. I pecked her on the cheek.

"*Hace tiempo que no te veo, Carlos,*" she said smiling. "It's been a long time."

"Too long," I said. "How are you, *linda?*"

She giggled like a fifteen-year-old.

"What is it this time?" she asked, smoothing back her copper hair.

"A fellow named Ronald Murray. All the information you have."

"Help yourself to a cup of coffee while I check on it."

She went into an adjoining room, moving like the queen of Sheba, and I drew a cup of the world's thickest coffee from the aluminum machine against the wall.

The three other women in the room eyed me while I added sugar and milk. Even with milk, it looked forbidding.

Sara came back a few minutes later with two forms in her hand. At the top right-hand corner of one was stapled a color photo of a good-looking blond-haired man who seemed about thirty-five. He looked at ease, the kind of person who likes having his picture taken. Sara handed me the sheets and I read quickly through the information: height, five feet eleven inches; weight, 175; eyes, blue; hair, blond; date of birth, October 15, 1939.

The photo was taken in '78 when he was thirty-nine; he was in good shape.

The car registration form told me he had a 1977 Volkswagen Rabbit, blue. I took the license number down on my pad.

"What kind of a case is it?" Sara asked curiously.

"You know I can't tell you that."

"Something serious?"

"No—suspicious husband."

"He's very goodlooking," she said, studying the photo.

"Does he look like a ladies' man to you?"

"Aren't you all?" she grinned. "Is he married?"

"Divorced."

"How's the coffee?"

"Whoever makes it should provide a knife and fork."

She laughed and passed my joke to an older woman at a corner desk, the guilty party, who also laughed. I treated them to a few more minutes of my incomparable wit and then beat a retreat to the door.

Eight o'clock the next morning found me sitting in my Toyota outside Condominio Ambassador, just up the hill and across the street from the parking lot exit. I knew I might very well be sitting there all day; it was a Wednesday, but many professors at the university worked an alternate-day class schedule. However, I was getting paid to sit and wait, and I've acquired a great deal of patience over the years.

By noon I was still sitting and waiting. I was also getting hungry. Nobody looking like Soto's daughter had gone in the building.

At one, feeling restless, I got out of my car and walked along the fence fronting the condominium. The parking lot was in the rear. I could see some of the cars in it, but didn't see a blue Rabbit. I decided the hell with it: I'd get a sandwich and coffee and return later. As I was striding back to my car, a blue Rabbit pulled up to the exit gate and the security guard lowered the chain for him. He was off down the hill. I sprinted for my own car, rammed it into gear, and took off after him. He was already well ahead.

I caught him at the light on Barbosa. There was one car between us—perfect. He made a right and then a little later a left at Gándara.

He was obviously going to the university, and I watched him turn in a minute later at the Gándara entrance. I couldn't follow him since the guard wouldn't let me through without a university windshield sticker. What now?

There were several entrances to the campus. He might come out this one, he might just as easily leave by any of the others. I decided, for lack of a better idea, to wait at this one. I parked across the street and walked to a nearby open-air sandwich shop and ate like a pig. I could stand with my elbows on the shop counter and watch the university entrance. After



nursing a coffee for twenty minutes, I went back to sit in the car and read the *San Juan Star* with one eye. There may be something in the world more boring than surveillance work, but I don't know what it is.

Enrique Soto was an architect with considerable money. People with a lot of money usually sent their kids to colleges in the States—if the kids were good enough. This girl sounded like she should be good: expensive private schools for thirteen years, apparently a student who liked science (which most didn't). So why was she going to the U.P.R.? Was it because her father couldn't bear the thought of having her away in the States for four years? What did that mean?

Four hours and four hundred cigarettes later, the blue Rabbit appeared at the entrance. I nearly missed it, I was so stupefied with boredom. He was alone. I picked him up and followed him home, then sat outside his building until dark waiting for a car like Isabel's or Isabel herself to show up. Nothing.

On Thursday it was much the same story. In the morning he went to a nearby shopping center and stopped in a supermarket and a department store. In the afternoon he drove to the university and stayed there two and a half hours (while I ate at the same sandwich shop and ordered a couple of sandwiches and Cokes to go). Once more he returned home alone. This time I decided I'd wait around until eleven or so. Maybe she came to see him in the evenings. I watched the sun set. I drank my warm Cokes. I ate my soggy sandwiches. I counted naked women jumping over fences. I got a stabbing pain at the base of my spine. Isabel Soto didn't appear.

The next morning I called Sr. Soto and told him that I thought we were wasting our time. He told me he wanted me to stay on it. He'd raise my fee. I said I'd stay on it and my fees were standard.

That day I lost Murray for the first time. He got me entangled in a beauty of a *tapón* on Ponce de León Avenue and there was no way to hold on to him. And this time he wasn't going to the university or the supermarket. I had no idea where he was going. I'm a curious fellow and I don't like having my curiosity frustrated. I returned to his apartment, and he didn't show up until three hours later. Isabel didn't come that evening either.

On Saturday morning the payoff came. He drove to a park next to the Hiram Bithorn Stadium and pulled up alongside Isabel's red Honda. She was waiting in the car. I parked down on the other side of the area and

got out. They were walking along the path past the kids' monkey bars. They walked close, with a certain appearance of intimacy, but without touching. They seemed to be deep in conversation.

Soto's daughter was chicly dressed in a beige outfit and high-heeled sandals. I got in pretty close, and once she turned around as if she thought I—or someone—might be following her. I didn't see why she would think so. Murray, wearing slacks and a *guayabera*, had a strange, vague kind of walk like a man on drugs.

They didn't exactly behave like lovers, but certainly not like mere acquaintances. After half an hour of walking, sitting on the swings, watching the kids playing, they got back into their separate cars and drove off. He held her arm before they parted, but he didn't kiss her. I followed him, and he returned to his apartment, driving like a demon. Somehow or other she'd certainly got to him. Had she broken the affair off? That was the explanation that seemed to fit all the facts. That night I cashed in my chips early.

On Sunday he went out only to get the newspaper and some doughnuts at a bake shop.

And on Monday he spotted me. Or at least it seemed he spotted me, because anyone who did the things he did with that car was either trying to lose a tail or was crazy. You couldn't keep up with him without being killed. I lost him in the vicinity of Las Américas Expressway. This time when I went back to his condominium, I parked out of sight around the corner and stood under a thick tree up the block. I stood there or near there until eleven that night. He didn't come back. I even went into the Ambassador's lobby and rang his buzzer to make sure I hadn't missed his return.

That wasn't one of my good nights. I don't sleep well when something's bothering me, and this whole case was bothering me. I didn't know why they seemed like lovers and yet somehow didn't. I didn't know why Murray had thought he was being followed and lost me today—I'm not all that clumsy as a tail. And where had he gone this afternoon and stayed until after eleven o'clock at night?

I was back there again the next morning, reading the *Star* with one eye. The police reports showed there'd been thirteen robberies in San Juan in the past twenty-four hours. There had also been two fatal car accidents, both involving drivers in their twenties. A man had been found stabbed to death in a park near El Morro fort in Old San Juan. He had

been identified as Ronald Murray of Condominio Ambassador in Rio Piedras. He was an astronomy professor at the University of Puerto Rico.

It was a very picturesque place to be murdered. Beneath me, San Juan Bay sprawled in the sun like a gently breathing sleeper. A flock of gulls wheeled overhead while others rose and fell with the respiration of the water. To my right was El Morro and the open ocean—a long, grey freighter was patiently steaming in. Across the bay I could see Cataño and the blue mountains beyond. The asphalt path on which we stood ran above the massive old city walls which dropped to the rocks and the water.

The policeman in charge of the case was a detective lieutenant named Romero. I knew him—in fact we'd once worked together on another murder case. He looked just as grey, tired, and fed up with life in general as he had then. Romero was a man who didn't like his work. Once, many years ago, he had.

Murray's body had been discovered at this very spot around six the previous evening. Since eight this morning, Romero and his men had been combing the area for evidence, particularly for the murder weapon. They hadn't found a damned thing, and were ready to pack it in.

"A wallet with fifty dollars, a Seiko watch, and a gold ring still on the body," Romero said. "So much for a nice simple robbery. What's your interest in this case, Bannon?"

"I told you. I knew Murray. I met him at a couple of parties."

"Yes, I know that's what you told me."

"You're getting very suspicious in your old age."

He gazed out over the water. "I'll find out eventually. Did this Murray have any enemies that you knew of?"

"We were just casual acquaintances. I didn't know him that well."

"We're digging up all we can on him, but so far it amounts to nothing helpful: no family in Puerto Rico, lived alone—maybe a girlfriend but we haven't found her yet."

"Why do you think there's a girlfriend?"

"There always is with guys like this. We'll find her."

I hoped not. "Can you tell if he was stabbed by a man or a woman?" I asked.

"The weapon seems to have been a thin-bladed, very sharp knife about six inches long. A deep, clean stab wound in the upper abdomen. Could

have been done by anyone. The time of death was late afternoon, not long before the body was found. As you can see from the blood, he crawled quite a distance before he passed out."

We both looked down at the brownish red stains on the path. They stretched back about fifty feet under the trees heavy with purple blossoms. Romero lit another one of his ever-present cigarettes and sat down on a bench. I sat beside him. Except for the voices of his men, it was very quiet. I could hear a bird singing.

"We had a paradise here," Romero said as if he'd read my thoughts, "and look what we did to it. We're not as bad as New York, but we're getting there. Not a day goes by without a murder, usually a couple. We don't have the men to handle half the workload, and many of those we do have don't know what the hell they're doing. In five years I retire."

"You won't know what to do with yourself."

"I've bought a piece of land out near Maunabo. I have family in Maunabo. I'm going to build a house and raise cows."

"You're kidding," I said.

"After thirty years on this force, boredom is something I couldn't look forward to more," Romero said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

He called his men together and we walked back to the cars.

I'd called Sr. Soto before driving out to his place. He had read about Murray's murder. He sounded very upset indeed.

Apolo is a pretty classy residential area where no two houses look the same, and a few look like nothing you've seen before. Soto's was one of these: a modern, curved-walled cement job with expanses of tinted glass; it gave the general impression of the result of fornication between a medieval castle and the Guggenheim Museum. A maid answered the door and led me into an endless living room with drapes on all four walls and a crystal chandelier in the center of the ceiling. You could just make it across the rug without snowshoes.

Soto was looking out a glass wall at his red bougainvillea. The maid disappeared.

"I want to thank you for being discreet," he said, motioning me to a sofa. "I must admit I was afraid you might tell the police about us."

"I was tempted—especially since the guy in charge of the case is an acquaintance of mine. But I decided against it for two reasons."

"Which were?"

"One, I try not to reveal confidential information relating to clients unless absolutely necessary—for example, if I thought one of them was a murderer."

I paused.

"And the other reason?" he prodded.

"The other reason is that I intend to pursue this case—which is now a murder case—myself, Sr. Soto."

"I didn't hire you for that. I hired you to follow Murray. He is dead. Your job is finished."

"But my curiosity isn't satisfied. I don't like unsolved murders, especially of people I'm hired to follow. And the police don't have a very good track record on this kind of killing. Where was your daughter yesterday afternoon, Sr. Soto?"

"Get out!" he barked.

"Tell me, or I'll go to the police with what I know."

"Damn you, she was here with me. All afternoon and all evening."

"Can I talk to her?"

"She's not home. And anyway, you couldn't if she were."

"You're not being very cooperative."

"You son of a bitch, I can destroy you in this city. I have the money and the friends."

"Where were *you* yesterday afternoon, Sr. Soto?"

"Get out!" he snapped again. "You're finished, Bannon. Get out and send me a bill."

I started for the hall, then turned at the doorway. "Look, Sr. Soto, I don't like this any more than you do. I'd much prefer to cultivate my garden, but I don't have enough money for farm tools, so I get involved in messes like this."

"You won't be seeing any more money for farm tools," he said.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But I still have to make sure there are gardens left to cultivate."

I left him chewing over that one and slammed the front door behind me.

The university campus was between Soto's house and my office. This seemed as good a time as any to pay it a visit. I parked in my usual place and asked the guard at the gate for directions to the office of the astronomy department.

When I found it, after some backtracking, I found an office no bigger than my own: a secretary and a typist and a half-open door marked "Director" behind which sat a man in his late thirties. I asked to speak to him. The secretary eyed me as if wondering whether she should inquire what my business was, then decided against it and rapped on his open door.

He told her to send me in.

Besides his desk and chair, there were two other chairs and no room to squeeze in anything more. He looked me over; and I could see that he already knew, as the secretary had, why I was there.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I'm Detective Bannon," I said. "I'm investigating Professor Murray's death."

He bought it as I'd expected, and didn't ask to see my police identification.

"Are you an American?"

The rest of the question, unsaid, went: What the hell is an American doing on the Puerto Rican police force?

"No, Puerto Rican, but my father was American."

"Sit down," he said.

He wore a light blue *guayabera*, seemed mild-mannered, pleasant, nervous about the situation. He spoke with a slight stammer.

"It's hard to believe," he said.

"We're trying to find someone who might know why Professor Murray was killed," I said.

"You mean it wasn't robbery?"

"No."

He let that sink in. "I'm afraid I can't help you. I wish I could. I didn't know Ron Murray all that well."

"Who did?"

"His office mate would be a good place to start: Professor Crosse. I'm not sure if he's in at this hour—just a moment."

He pulled a sheaf of papers from a desk drawer. He was checking Crosse's teaching schedule.

"Professor Crosse is in class till one. If you go downstairs, you should be able to catch him after class. Office 16. All our offices are in the lower depths," he smiled.

The stairway to the basement was around the side of the building and

wasn't easy to negotiate. The stairs were narrow; students elbowed past me in both directions. I had twenty minutes to wait. I spent them looking at the girls in skin-tight jeans walking through the *pasillo*. A few of them looked back. I considered whether I shouldn't have taken up teaching—I had, in fact, thought of it back in college, millenniums ago. Life does funny things to you.

At five to one, a tall, shirtsleeved man in his forties approached the door of Room 16 with a load of books in one hand and a key in the other. He glanced at me as he shoved the key in the lock.

"Professor Crosse?"

"Yes."

"Could I speak to you a moment? I'm investigating the killing of Professor Murray."

He looked taken aback, but adjusted quickly. I followed him into a cramped two-desk office with paint-peeling walls and ancient furniture. He dumped his books on one of the desks.

"I doubt I can be of much help," he said with what sounded like a British accent.

"Are you English?"

"Yes," he said. He ran his fingers nervously through thinning, unruly hair. "You don't sound much like a Puerto Rican policeman."

I went through that bit again.

"I suppose you'd better have a seat," he said.

"Thank you."

I took the chair in front of the other desk, Murray's desk. It was a very neat desk with books lined along its rear against the wall.

"We're trying to come up with some reason why Professor Murray would have been murdered."

"Ghastly business," he said with his clipped British diction. "Don't know *what* to think of it really."

"We'd appreciate any help you might be able to give us."

"Didn't know Murray all that well, you know. Kept to himself pretty much. Did give a few parties."

"Was he involved in any trouble?"

"Nothing I ever heard about," he said. "Quiet fellow, Murray. Good teacher."

"Women? Debts? Anything of that sort?"

"Oh, Ron had a few lady friends over the past years, but nothing very

serious. A bit jaundiced about women, I think, after his second divorce."

"We've been told he was seeing one of his students lately."

He drummed his long fingers on the desk. "Can't say that I know anything about that," he lied.

"Are you sure?"

"Look—I really don't think I can be of any help to you, Mr. . . ."

"Bannon. You won't mind if I look through Professor Murray's desk."

He shrugged and turned to arrange some papers.

Inside the desk I found more books, some student exams, university letterhead, and the usual assortment of pens, pencils, and paperclips. I turned back to Crosse.

"Look, Professor Crosse, someone stabbed Mr. Murray to death yesterday. There's got to be a good reason. You were his office mate and you say you don't know of any. If you don't, who might?"

He lifted his shoulders again. "I don't think Ronald had any close friends in the department."

"Well, what is your theory, Professor Crosse? A man isn't murdered for nothing."

"My theory? The usual thing, I should guess: some drug addict assaulted him for his money."

"His money was still on him."

"When Ronald put up resistance, the robber stabbed him and then panicked and fled without the money."

"Well, thank you very much, Professor Crosse."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help."

He got up to accompany me into the hall. The crowd was already thinning out as the one o'clock classes began.

I have a standing rule that when one of my cases involves a killing—even peripherally—I strap on a gun. Private detectives have been known to get themselves hurt. So when I got back to my office, I took the Browning BDA .380 from its locked desk drawer and put it where it might do me some good. Then I called Romero at HQ to see if he was having any luck.

"Nothing solid yet. His last divorce was pretty bloody, according to one of his neighbors. Murray told him about it when he'd had too much to drink one night. We're sending a lead up to the States to check on the ex-wife. He's also been seen around campus with a female student lately—but you wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Bannon?"



"Why should I?" I asked innocently.

"That's what I thought," Romero said. He rang off.

That evening I began my surveillance of Isabel Soto. Their house stood among only three or four others at the top of a hill. One road led up to the crest of the hill where it circled past the houses like the loop of a lariat. All I had to do was sit at the bottom of the hill near the first street that turned off. Since this was a fully developed residential area with many cars around, I wouldn't look conspicuous. I sat there till midnight, but the red Honda didn't pass me.

The next morning I drove to the same spot. At nine thirty she came down the hill, alone in the car. She led me out to Plaza Carolina shopping mall, which is quite a drive. We spent about two hours together shopping. It was a wonderful place to tail someone. She stopped in two expensive boutiques, a bookstore, and Sears. In Sears she went into the restroom for some time. When she came out again she had an odd look about her. It took me a minute, but only a minute, to pinpoint that look. I'd seen it before. Now I knew why Murray had been such a crazy driver.

Isabel had a nice walk, the kind of walk slim, moneyed, well-brought-up girls have. She also had an educated taste in clothes. She had everything, but she didn't look happy. I guessed that this shopping trip was to take her mind off what had happened to Murray. A lot of women do that—some men too.

If she had classes at the university today, she was skipping them. That afternoon we took in a movie called *Nine to Five*. It was a fairly funny movie, but I didn't see her laugh. Around two she drove back home and didn't go out again that day.

The phone was doing a noisy tango as I let myself into my apartment around midnight. I picked it up: "Bannon here."

"Well, better there than at the university," Romero's voice said caustically.

"Oh, you heard about that."

"You impersonated a police officer, Bannon. I could have your ass for that!"

"I didn't impersonate anybody—I just said I was a detective investigating Murray's murder."

"Just what the hell is your interest in this case, Bannon?"

"I can't tell you yet. Give me a couple of days."

"Why should I?"

"Because I may just close it for you. I think I'm on to something."  
"I should string you up by your thumbs," Romero said. "How did you get involved in this?"

"A client asked me to tail Murray. I lost him on the day he was murdered."

"Who's the client and why the tail?"

"I can't tell you that. Give me a couple of days."

"You pull another stunt like that and you'll be standing on a Social Security line."

"I won't."

"You damned well better not." He banged down the receiver.

I peeled off my clothes to take a shower. The phone rang again. I contemplated dropping the refrigerator on the telephone.

*"Hola, jefe. Es Maria."*

"You should be in bed, Maria."

"I am in bed. Look, chief, we got a call from Sr. Soto this morning. He's pretty angry—he says you'd better forget the Murray case. He doesn't want his daughter involved."

"What else is new?"

"Nothing much. Raul ran the checks in that business machines case. So far everything looks on the up-and-up."

"I won't be in tomorrow, Maria. I'm on a surveillance."

"Whatever you say."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing, chief. Sweet dreams."

I took a long shower, switched on the TV, tried all the channels, switched off the TV, and made myself a drink. Seemed like nobody liked me these days. I could cry into my rum, but the tears would dilute it. I decided to put a head on it instead.

On Thursday morning, Soto's daughter came down that hill like Mario Andretti on the last lap. I revved up after her and followed her to the old Caguas road, where she turned left toward San Juan. She wove in and out of traffic into Rio Piedras, and I thought she was headed for the university, but instead she passed it and turned right into the road that swings around the San José Lagoon to the airport. She passed the airport and took the next right which leads to Balneario Isla Verde and Boca de Cangrejos. We toiled along past the long stretch of beach, the Cangrejos Yacht Club, and across the bridge. Finally she swung uphill to the left

into what I knew was a dead end overlooking the ocean. I slowed down and parked near one of the ratty restaurants that infest the area.

When I reached the top of the hill on foot, I saw her car parked in the lot in front of what had once been a sea aquarium. It was just a deserted hunk of moldering concrete now. Isabel was standing out near the edge of the sandy rise which dropped to the sea. She glanced down along the shoreline to the left where there were two cars parked—it was a place popular with lovers—and then ambled in that direction as if she were just killing time. I thought she was waiting for someone. While her back was towards me, I moved up behind a copse of thick-leaved bushes about eight feet high that grew near the edge. Below me great green swells undulated and crashed on the shingled rocks. An old couple was exploring stagnant pools of trapped water just beneath the rise. I wondered what they were looking for.

Isabel turned and strolled back towards the bushes that hid me. Just then a pale green Pinto pulled into the parking lot and parked beside her Honda. I crouched lower behind the broad leaves. The door of the Pinto swung open and a tall man in shirtsleeves climbed out. Even at this distance I could identify him as Professor Crosse, Murray's office mate. Isabel had also seen him, but she stayed where she was, about a dozen feet from me. Crosse approached rapidly. If she didn't move, I might be able to hear what they said.

Crosse looked nervous, his thinning hair blowing in the breeze. As he reached her, he put his hands on her upper arms and looked into her eyes the way only a man in love looks. Isabel stood motionless. Crosse's face moved closer to hers, and suddenly she pulled away and took a few steps in my direction. She was looking at the ground, not at Crosse.

"You've already guessed, haven't you," he said.

Isabel nodded, almost imperceptibly, her eyes still on the ground.

"It wasn't the way you think," Crosse said.

"I don't think anything," Isabel said. "What way was it?"

"I had no choice—he forced me. I never intended . . ."

He raked his hair with his fingers. "When I told him to meet me, it was only to threaten him, to make him leave you alone. I told him on the phone that if he didn't see me, I'd go to the police."

"Why there—at that park?" she asked.

"I don't know. I suppose I felt it would give me some psychological advantage to have him where he wouldn't feel at home—as he would at

the office."

"I don't believe you. I don't think you had to meet him there just to threaten him."

"He was a swine," Crosse's voice had become shrill, "but I swear I didn't intend to kill him. It was *his* knife—he pulled it on *me*. He said that when you dealt with the people he dealt with, you had to have some protection."

"Tell me how it happened," Isabel said. "Exactly how it happened." Her own voice was rising.

Crosse looked desperate to make her understand: "He was very—what do you say—hopped up. His hands were trembling. When I told him I loved you and I'd do anything, including exposing him, to keep him from making a pusher of you, he was crazy enough to pull the knife. And then, and then I just completely lost control. I went crazy myself. I grabbed the arm with the knife and he actually tried to stab me. We struggled—it was unreal—I hated him. I wanted to kill him. And then . . ." He spread his hands in a "don't you see?" gesture.

A thin, weird laugh issued from Isabel's throat. "And you a married professor with three kids."

"We'll work it out," Crosse said desperately.

Isabel's head swung back and forth like a puppy trying to shake off water.

Crosse stepped close to her and tried to touch her again, but she pulled away. "Are you all right? You don't look well."

"I'm just due for another," she said. "The intervals get shorter."

"The swine deserved to die," Crosse said intensely. "His rotten parties. He started you. But when he came up with that business about how you should sell it at the university, so you could get more—so he could get *his* cut . . ."

"Oh God," Isabel said. "Stop it, will you. Shut up."

"I'm not sorry," Crosse said. "I'm not. Still—it's something I find hard to deal with. I had to tell you."

"All right, you've told me, you've told me. Thank you very much. Now please go."

"What are you saying? I can't go—not like this. We'll work it out. I'll take care of you. You can beat this thing."

Suddenly, surprisingly, she let her head fall on his chest as though she were very, very tired. They were both silent a moment, then she said:

"Can you beat it?"

I straightened up and moved out from behind the tall bushes. The two of them just stared at me. Finally Crosse said: "How did *you*—"

"I'll tell you about it later," I said. "I think we'd better go down to police headquarters."

The girl stared at me wildly; she needed that fix badly. I was afraid she might break and run, which didn't seem like a very good idea in her condition. I grabbed her wrist.

"Don't *touch* her!" Crosse shouted.

He looked pathetic, like a little boy whose world has caved in around him. I released her wrist.

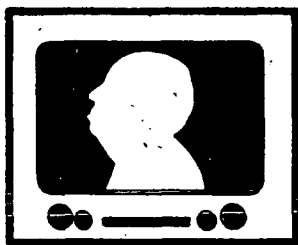
"All right," I said. "Let's go. I have a gun in my jacket; don't make me take it out."

"Just don't touch her," Crosse said more quietly.

"Don't worry," I said, "nobody will be touching her for a while, except the doctors."



**The June Issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale April 29.**



# CRIME ON SCREEN

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**by Peter Christian**

He hasn't liked any of the screen's Mike Hammers, except the time he himself played the role, Mickey Spillane told COS. Most of the films made from his bestselling novels failed to catch his hard-as-nails dynamism. Indeed, there was some talk at the beginning that his books were unfilmable. But the screen adaptations, although never polished or costly productions, have always been diverse and interesting—sometimes even colorful.

Spillane's first bestseller waited six years to reach the screen. *I, the Jury* (1953), shot in 3-D, was a reasonably faithful attempt to reproduce Mike Hammer's violent world, a crime-riddled, corrupt New York that, surprisingly, was framed in a series of Christmas cards showing peaceful city scenes. They served as curtain-raisers to the various settings of the story. Choosing the actor to play Mike Hammer, however, was perhaps as difficult a task as casting James Bond a decade later, and the selection has never been satisfactory: no one has played Mike twice in a feature. But the first Hammer—Biff Elliot playing a grim young bruiser seeking vengeance for the murder of an army buddy who once saved his life—seems in retrospect a passable choice; he was able to mix the character's violence-prone nature and his aura of rough heroism. Hammer's caveman nobility was heightened by the film's occasional first person narration, a device used in the book. The seedy back streets of the novel, and the penthouse revels, were closely re-created, although the film's vagueness about the book's heavy drug traffic made it somewhat hard to understand. The memorable ending, wherein Hammer shoots the killer

with the words, "It was easy," was there as well, even if it was toned down so that the shooting seemed as much self defense as casual vengeance.

The next year, Victor Saville, the producer of *I, the Jury*, tried his hand at a Spillane novel *without* Mike Hammer, 1954's *The Long Wait*. In it Anthony Quinn played an amnesiac whose arrival stirs up a small town; the townspeople suspect he was responsible for a two-year-old robbery and murder. Quinn was excellent, and the mystery has some interesting touches.

That same year, Spillane played himself in a circus melodrama, *Ring of Fear*, in which, as a pal of Clyde Beatty, he comes to the circus owner's rescue when a homicidal maniac stalks the big tents.

In 1955, Robert Aldrich decided to tackle the controversial Spillane with *Kiss Me Deadly*. Hammer was played by Ralph Meeker as a ruthless, amoral heel, a Los Angeles private eye on the trail of a black box emitting a strange glow. That the Pandora-like box is radioactive is obvious, but at the climax the villain who has opened it is consumed with a searing flame that threatens to engulf both Mike and his secretary Zelda. The mushroom cloud ending under the credits leaves the finish cryptic and the viewer bewildered.

Two years later, Robert Bray starred as Hammer in a routine adaptation of *My Gun Is Quick*, which begins with the murder of a prostitute. Hammer's adventures on TV also began in 1957. Darren McGavin portrayed the private eye, but he was a shade too well-groomed and cheerful. In the same way the violence of the story was carefully monitored and subdued. But the series lasted three seasons.

In 1963, Mickey Spillane became the first bestselling mystery author to portray his own creation in a feature film. It is an older, battered Hammer who pulls himself out of the gutter in *The Girl Hunters*—actually out of a seven year alcoholic binge caused by the disappearance and possible death of his secretary-lover Zelda at the hands of the Dragon, a Communist assassin. The case gets mixed up with the murder of a U.S. Senator, and Hammer briefly dallies with the senator's seductive widow, Shirley Eaton, before an explosive climax. The exteriors were filmed in New York's teeming West Side, especially around the now-defunct *Herald Tribune* newspaper building, and columnist Hy Gardner played a real-life role as Mike's friend ("I hate those Commie punks as much as you do"). The interiors were filmed in England where there were some raised

eyebrows over Miss Eaton's bathing attire, a beach suit a nun might wear today. Spillane himself was excellent, capturing all the gritty purposefulness of his character and striding from scene to scene either lugging or wearing his great trenchcoat. Naturally, it is his favorite film from his own work.

In 1970, Spillane's *The Delta Factor* was filmed, essentially a CIA pirate melodrama set in the Caribbean.

We can shortly expect a new, searing screen version of *I, the Jury*—with more license than that first adaptation of almost three decades ago. And recently CBS-TV presented a two hour show called "Mickey Spillane's Margin for Murder," in which Kevin Dobson as Hammer avenges the death of a buddy ("If your friend gets killed, you do something about it"). Both Dobson and his pert Zelda (a "good guy") are attractive; uncharacteristically, though, the detective turns the villains over to the police at the end! Vengeance is no longer Mike's . . .

The astute TV critic Judith Crist selected "Margin for Murder" as one of the ten best television features of 1981, claiming it "revives and revitalizes the private eye genre," and calling Mike Hammer a "compassionate avenger." The Spillane of old seems himself redeemed and faces a revitalized future.



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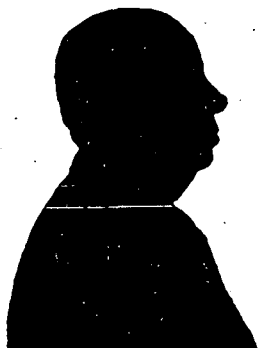
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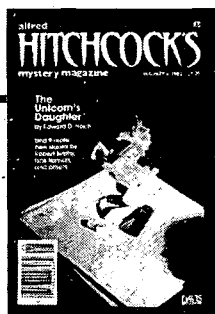
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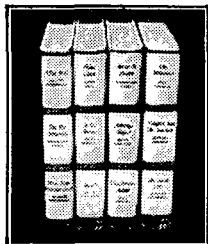
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